

8

Gakuto  
Mikumo

ILLUSTRATION BY  
Manyako

# STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE TYRANT AND THE FOOL



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# ∞ STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE TYRANT AND THE FOOL

Gakuto Mikumo  
Illustration by Manyako

**Avrora Florestina**  
Kaleid Blood  
The world's mightiest—  
cowardly—vampire

**Kojou Akatsuki**  
Blood Servant  
Servant of the primogenitor,  
unaware and undying







**Nagisa Akatsuki**  
The Hybrid  
Remarkable priestess, vessel  
for the primogenitor

**Asagi Aiba**  
Cyber Empress  
Gorgeous, selfish  
high school cyber genius



**Motoki Yaze**  
**Hyper Adapter**  
Cheerful classmate  
or two-faced jester?

**Veldiana Caruana**  
**Earl's Daughter**  
An avenger fallen from grace,  
her homeland taken





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# STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE TYRANT AND THE FOOL

8

GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY  
MANYAKO

YEN  
PRESS  
NEW YORK



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STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 8

GAKUTO MIKUMO

Translation by Jeremiah Bourque

Cover art by Manyako

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SUTORAIKU ZA BURADD0

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INTRO

## INTRO

The room was cold and dark.

It was bleak and underground with exposed metal framework. Countless tubes and insulated cables crawled across the walls and floor like snakes, creating a chaotic picture that resembled a living being's circulatory system.

The facility was probably a cutting-edge lab—but isolated, a secret block that no sane researcher would ever set foot in. Viewed up close, the tranquil sight was either a mausoleum to preserve a highly valuable corpse or perhaps a cage to seal an abominable demon.

The density of the mist suddenly increased.

The thick fog swirled and grew even heavier, finally solidifying into the form of a lone girl: a vampiress wearing a black leather coat. Based on her appearance, she was seventeen or eighteen with glossy brown hair. Her face bore a child's innocence, giving the impression that she didn't have a violent bone in her body. Her singular casual motions exuded a faint sense of refinement.

Yet the expression on her face was stiff from tension.

Her crimson eyes focused on the center of the underground lab. There, atop a metal pedestal, sat a block of transparent ice, probably over six meters in diameter. It looked like a beautifully cut gemstone, with complex facets seemingly crafted by a practiced hand.

Inside the ice was the silhouette of a small human girl, hugging her knees as she continued to sleep.

She had a beautiful face, like a fairy's. Her long, faintly blond hair resembled a rainbow, with changing colors at different angles.

She was a stunning sprite that somehow gave off an air of malevolence. She



slumbered on quietly inside the cold, icy coffin—a sleeping princess who’d been cursed by a witch...

“...”

The brown-haired vampiress glared at the frozen tomb, slowly raising her right hand.

That hand gripped a black, foldable crossbow.

Its barrel was already loaded with a bolt—a metal one that glowed silver. With a diameter of some four centimeters, it was less of a bolt than a stake. Its surface was packed with finely engraved magic symbols, and each one emitted a pale glow.

“...Forgive us...”

The vampiress shut her eyes and weakly murmured, as if seeking forgiveness.

“Aurora Florestina, the twelfth Kaleid Blood...please... We are sorry for awakening you...”

She bit her lip as she set her finger on the crossbow’s trigger.

Her arm jerked slightly, and the string gave a savage cry.

The silver bolt she had fired ripped through the chilly air and impaled the icy coffin. That instant, a brilliant flash blotted out her field of vision.

The explosive demonic energy she had just unleashed went wild, scattering and bursting the tubes and cables. The concrete ceiling began to crumble.

With a great roar, the ice block shattered. The girl’s hair gently danced in a pure, white whirlwind of freezing air. And her rainbow hair glowed like billowing flames—



He awoke to the sensation of chains around him.

When he closely examined his surroundings, which looked like the scene of an industrial accident, Kojou Akatsuki found himself confined to a cheap, metal pipe chair, with slightly rusted steel shackles binding his arms behind him.

“The hell...is this...?”

Kojou blinked his uncooperative eyelids, raising his head with a confused look.

The room was antique, like something straight out of the dungeon of a castle from the Middle Ages. The walls were built from uneven, natural stones, but they were so thick he had trouble breathing. A small window had been carved out of the stone wall, letting the rays of the evening sun pour in, red like the color of blood. There was an orange carpet spread over the floor. He'd never seen this room before.

"Manacles?"

Kojou let out a low groan as he felt the cold metal bite into his skin. Apparently, not only were both arms chained behind his back, but his wrists were secured to the chair as well. He'd seen this in plenty of Hollywood movies—a captured hoodlum being interrogated to turn on his organization.

*The hell's going on?* Kojou thought, his brain in a jumble as he desperately twisted his body. However, the metal did not show the slightest sign of releasing him. Even Kojou's upper body strength couldn't break them off, and he was the World's Mightiest Vampire.

Even so, Kojou did not give up, stubbornly continuing to thrash around—and then he sensed someone behind him, waking up in a foul mood, probably annoyed by the sounds of straining chains.

"Mm...? What? What's that sound?"

"Asagi? Asagi, is that you?!"

Kojou forced his neck to turn as he shifted toward the voice. He saw a girl sitting in a chair, positioned back-to-back with him. Her hair was dyed a cheerfully bright color and styled in a showy manner; her school uniform was tastefully decked out. The familiar back belonged to Asagi Aiba.

She was also secured to her chair, not by chains but with some kind of slender rope. Of course, Asagi, a powerless high school girl, lacked the strength necessary to rip it apart.

She looked down at her own bound body for a few moments.

"Kojou? What is this? What's going on? Don't tell me you get off on tying up

girls...?”

Asagi made an exasperated face as she glared half-lidded back at Kojou. Apparently, she’d decided their current situation was the result of Kojou playing a prank on her.

Faced with false accusations, Kojou furiously shook his head.

“I don’t have any twisted fetishes like that! I was tied up when I awoke, same as you!”

“Tied up...?”

Asagi looked frightened as she confirmed that the ropes really weren’t coming off. It was only natural for her to be concerned, waking up in a strange place with her entire body restrained.

“Come to think of it, where is this? And why was I asleep, anyway?”

“Lemme see, I heard that Nagisa collapsed back at school and...”

Kojou’s head was littered with the cobwebs of sleep as he rummaged through vague memories.

During lunch, Kojou had been told that his little sister, Nagisa Akatsuki, had fainted. He’d hurried to the hospital, which, in turn, was attacked by the Chaos Bride—the Third Primogenitor, ruler of Central America.

The black lightning cloud. The burning torrent. And then, the skeletal giant filled with a dark void—she freely employed such Beast Vassals, rivaling natural disasters, and had tried to destroy the hospital. Kojou barely stopped her.

Or more accurately, she’d accomplished her objective and retreated of her own volition.

Either way, the menace of the Third Primogenitor had passed, and they were left behind at the half-destroyed hospital. Afterward—

Asagi violently shook her metal pipe chair, turning around with great force.

“I remember now...! Hey, Kojou! What’s the big idea, turning into a vampire?!”

“Uh...”



*She starts with that*, Kojou thought as he sighed listlessly. Now that she mentioned it, the turmoil of the Third Primogenitor's attack had exposed the truth—that he was a vampire—to Asagi.

“What the hell, you're the Fourth Primogenitor?! How *dare* you keep that from me all this time... and on top of that, Himeragi's your watcher, and you've been drinking her blood left and right!”

“W-well... I don't really think that last part is true...” Cowed by Asagi's verbal onslaught, Kojou could only manage a mumbled retort.

Apparently, as far as Asagi was concerned, Kojou's non-human status was greatly overshadowed by it being a secret known only to Yukina.

And so, Asagi greeted Kojou's excuse with an inhospitable, “Oh, really...?” Then she continued, “So at the very least, you acknowledge being a vampire. After all, you've put your hands on other girls, too, like that Kirasaka girl, or that Aldegian princess!”

“H-how do you know that...?!”

It was only after his unwitting exclamation that Kojou realized his mistake. Asagi's unemotional eyes glared coldly at Kojou. His palms were thoroughly drenched with sweat.

“W-wait, you're wrong. There were...various circumstances, and it couldn't be avoided...”

“If I recall correctly, isn't lust what drives a vampire to drink blood?” Asagi asked casually, seeming to suppress her rage.

*Ugh*, Kojou groaned, his throat tightening. Besides demonic power replenishment under emergency circumstances, lust was the trigger for vampiric impulses. Of course, this was regularly unknown to someone raised in a Demon Sanctuary like Asagi.

Actually, Kojou had engaged in far more physical contact with Yukina and the others than had been necessary for mere drinking of blood, so he couldn't justify himself if pressed, but...

“...Man, this is really throwin' me off.”

A stale look came over Kojou as his still-bound shoulders slumped.

“What is?”

“Er, normally, wouldn’t someone be more scared of a vampire primogenitor...?”

“Huh? Why do I have to be scared of you after all this time?”

The truly mystified rejoinder put Kojou at a loss for words.

Asagi had known him for ages, beginning shortly after he’d arrived on Itogami Island. Being so used to demons, she wasn’t scared to find out that her old friend was a vampire.

“Well, I suppose it’s kinda hard by now...”

“Of course. But I *do* want you to explain why all this happened.”

Asagi stared at Kojou, her face suddenly serious.

Certainly, Kojou had been an ordinary human when he and Asagi had first met. And it was considered impossible for someone born human to turn into a vampire along the way.

In the first place, vampire primogenitors were the oldest vampires of each bloodline. Naturally, Asagi doubted how a mere human could straddle the line between man and demon and inherit such power.

“Yeah, you see, that Aurora girl, she...”

He trailed off, assailed by dizziness. He felt a sharp pain, like his brain was cracking. Something felt eerie, like his limbs were going to fall off.

It was just like when he’d tried to explain things to Yukina. He couldn’t form the words. A memory of the past, on the brink of surfacing, sank back into the darkness.

Asagi, finding Kojou’s silence suspicious, prodded him again.

“Aurora—you mean the girl under the hospital? The one sleeping in a block of i...”

But her words, too, trailed off midway. Her bound body bent over as she exhaled in apparent anguish.

“That hurt... What’s with this headache?”

“...Asagi?”

Kojou looked back in surprise. He did a double take when he realized what had just happened to her.

Even if he didn’t know the reason, Kojou could accept that he’d lost his memory. After all, he was a mere human who’d laid his hands on a primogenitor’s power. Surely that must have strained his body. If losing part of his memory was the price to pay, he thought he’d gotten off easy.

Yet, Asagi’s missing memories were a different story. If that happened to her, a girl with no known connection, it would no longer be Kojou’s personal problem. Surely they hadn’t both lost their memories by coincidence from the same incident. It meant someone intentionally took them away.

That might mean that Asagi herself was somehow involved in the incident surrounding the Fourth Primogenitor. Probably, because she’d been right at Kojou’s side—





“—So you really can’t remember.”

As Kojou was wracked with unease, a gentle voice echoed from behind.

Her presence undetected, a small, black-haired girl wearing a middle school uniform was standing in a shadow along a stone wall.

“Himeragi?!”

“I have always harbored this question. Why did no one around senpai notice that he had become the Fourth Primogenitor? Well, setting aside senpai himself forgetting, it is most unnatural for those closest to him, such as Aiba, to not notice the change.”

Yukina Himeragi stepped forward without a sound, gripping a silver spear.

Kojou was a bit thrown off at her presence, somewhat different from the norm.

She was supple and tenacious, with a beautiful, graceful visage that retained traces of childhood. Her tightly pursed lips made him recall how she looked just after he’d met her. She seemed tough and unapproachable, which was appropriate to her title of Sword Shaman.

As Kojou and Asagi sat bound, Yukina looked down at them, continuing to speak in a cold, businesslike manner.

“However, that mystery has been resolved. It is not only senpai, but true for others as well.”

“Y’mean, having our memories manipulated...?”

“Yes. Though, they have not been merely sealed away, but rather, stolen...”

For some reason, seeing Yukina casually reply to that question made Kojou distinctly apprehensive.

If Kojou and Asagi were tied up, why was Yukina the only one free? In the first place, why wasn’t she surprised to see them both bound...?

“Well, whatever. At any rate, could you tell us where we are, Himeragi? What are we doing tied up in a place like this, anyway?”

Kojou asked the question as gently as he could, trying not to provoke Yukina

any more than necessary. Yukina gazed at Kojou unemotionally; after a brief, uncomfortable pause, she finally gave a halting reply.

“You...both fainted, right after seeing the vampire frozen in ice at the MAR hospital.”

“Fainted?”

“Yes. Perhaps because you were on the verge of remembering *her*.”

“Aurora, you mean...”

*So that was her*, thought Kojou, biting his lip. The installation under the MAR hospital housed a giant coffin of ice, and the previous Fourth Primogenitor—Aurora Florestina—slept within.

When Kojou saw her, he regained his memory for but a brief moment. And apparently, the next moment, he’d lost consciousness and collapsed. So he hadn’t been wrong to think that she was deeply connected to his and Asagi’s memory loss.

“So you’re the one who brought us here, Himeragi?”

“Well, yes. I’m sorry. There were no beds, so I had to use the chairs.” Yukina’s apology lacked any emotion.

Kojou grimaced as he looked up at her. “I get the basics, but what’s with the chains and manacles?”

*Get ‘em off already!* was Kojou’s unvoiced plea, but Yukina bluntly shook her head.

“I am sorry, but you both must remain like this for a while longer.”

“What for?!”

“It seems a little more time is required to prepare.”

After saying that, Yukina began to walk in a circle around Kojou and Asagi. That was when Kojou noticed: There were odd symbols embossed on the dark orange carpet, directly underneath him and Asagi. The magic circle gave off an acutely malevolent air.

Yukina remained silent as she gently walked behind Kojou, checking on the

pattern. Her bizarre behavior gave him an even creepier feeling about the symbols beneath him.

“...Preparations...? What the hell for...?” Kojou asked with a broken voice, but Yukina, standing in his blind spot, did not reply.

Asagi, who had remained silent up to that point, opened her mouth. “Hey... It’s been bugging me since earlier, but those things on the walls, are they...?”

Asagi was looking straight at some strange metallic devices suspended from the stone wall. They included chairs with sharp barbs on them, wheels, saws, and pincers; one look at the ominous shapes gave way to easily imagining their inhumane purposes. Their rusty cracks had been dyed black, but this only made them creepier. The interior designer had abysmal taste.

“Torture devices for use on vile criminals. Apparently, devices like these really were used in the Middle Ages.”

Yukina had said this in a wholly unmoved voice. Her calm was frightening in itself.

“T-torture devices...?”

Asagi gulped and swallowed hard.

While they’d been unconscious, Kojou and Asagi had been locked away and bound in a room far from prying eyes. Now, as for the countless torture devices—Kojou could think of any number of possibilities about how Yukina might use them, and all were terrible.

“Hey, Kojou, what’s going on here?! I kind of had this sense before, but that girl, is she actually the really obsessive, jealous type?”

“H-Himeragi is a stalker to the bone, for sure, and I feel like she does get obsessed with things at times, but...”

“What, she’s going to eliminate me because I know your secret? She thinks she can’t have you to herself anymore, so...? Ah, geez! This is because you laid a hand on a troublesome girl with no thought to the future!”

“I didn’t do anything! She pushed herself onto me!”

In low voices, the pair continued their argument of angry whispers, and Kojou

became backed into a corner.

“You have made me well aware of the way you both normally regard me.”

Yukina, dutifully listening to the exchange, looked somewhat hurt as she murmured. It was a surprisingly calm reaction. She continued:

“You seem to be making impolite assumptions, but these devices are mere magical catalysts. They are not actually used for torture.”

Kojou asked, his tone still somewhat uneasy, “Magical catalysts...? Why use things like those for...?”

Yukina sighed deeply.

“In the sphere of magic, it is a general rule that the older a device is, the stronger its power. The accumulation of the creator and subsequent owners’ thoughts change it from a mere thing into a magical object—though in a place like this, it might be the hatred of the victims more than the feelings of the owners.”

*I see*, Kojou thought, grasping the logic. Just as Old Guard vampires contained vast demonic power within their bodies, many so-called divine objects and demonic devices no doubt held power proportional to their age. However...

“Uh, what do you plan on using dangerous items like that for, anyway?!”

“So you *do* want to keep Kojou all for yourself, and—”

“I do not!”

Yukina’s cheeks puffed up as Kojou and Asagi eyed her doubtfully.

“Umm, well, you say that, but in this kind of situation—”

With a conflicted expression, Kojou began to speak, but he abruptly trailed off, suddenly realizing the true nature of the room in which Yukina had confined them.

“...Kojou?” Asagi seemed worried as she called out to him.

But Kojou kept his mouth shut and said nothing.

An old, stately stonework structure. The unique atmosphere hovering within. And the fact the surrounding area was teeming with dense magical energy.



Kojou had experienced all those things once before. The form of the structure was different, but in that world, such a thing was no great mystery. After all, it was *a world inside a dream*—

“Himeragi...don’t tell me that this is...”

“Yes.”

Yukina looked back at Kojou and solemnly nodded.

Certainly, he could understand why repulsive torture tools were placed here. After all, it was a jail for vile people to begin with: a space to confine dangerous criminals no normal prison could hold.

And in the event Kojou’s demonic power should run amok, no harm would come to Itogami Island. At least, as long as Kojou and the others were shut inside.

“Senpai, Aiba, you will be regaining those memories...”

While Kojou and Asagi struggled to respond, Yukina gripped her spear, examining them as she spoke. Then, she added:

“...here, in the Prison Barrier.”



CHAPTER ONE  
THE FUGITIVES

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE FUGITIVES

### 1

She gazed at the sea from a café terrace in the harbor district.

She was in Itogami City, the Far East Demon Sanctuary, an artificial island floating atop the ocean nearly three hundred kilometers south of Tokyo. A twisted land constructed from resin, metal, and sorcery. Powerful tropical sunrays shone upon the vast ocean, stretching as far as she could see. To her, a native Eastern European, such a sight was a novelty.

But she was tired of gazing at it every day.

*Of course, it's not a bad place to live,* she mused. Even if over four decades had passed since the Holy Ground Treaty went into effect, there were still precious few cities where humans and demons could coexist as if it was normal.

The buildings were tidy, and public order was pretty decent. And more than that, the food was delicious. If someone asked her if it was easy to live there, *yes* was the only honest answer she could give.

Things were too expensive, though; for example, the slice of cheesecake on display at the café. In her far-off homeland, she could probably buy the entire cake for the same price.

Of course, as an artificial isle, Itogami Island was not very food-sufficient, so she could understand that importing food from the homeland jacked up the prices. However, if she was a guest learning a restaurant's prices on that island, she'd think they had lost their minds.

"This is an objection...a protest...yes, the fact I'm ordering only one cup of coffee isn't because I'm poor, it's a type of protest against the government..."

Saying it for her own benefit, she poured in sugar and milk until her coffee

was saturated and took a sip of the sweetened drink. Her first caloric intake in half a day gradually permeated her hungry body.

“Ugh... Why is this happening to me, a daughter of Caruana...?”

Out of the blue, she complained about how far she had fallen from her past carefree life as the daughter of an esteemed nobleman. She ferociously shook her head, swallowing back the rest of the words.

She didn’t want the person arriving to meet her there to hear her.

A tall woman approached, wearing a metal bracelet clasped over her left wrist—with the markings of a demon registration bracelet. Her hair was short, and she had sharp, almond-shaped eyes. She wore a modest dark blue suit and carried a high-end brand’s attaché case. She was a beautiful woman with a chilly atmosphere that could cut through the air like a sharp blade.

“MAR’s Chief of Research, Mimori Akatsuki, I presume?”

The girl set down her coffee cup and rose to her feet, addressing the beautiful woman in the suit.

MAR, Magna Ataraxia Research Incorporated, was a giant corporation spanning every corner of East Asia. One of the world’s few sorcerous manufacturing conglomerates, their product lines covered everything from cold medicine to weapons.

Mimori Akatsuki was a woman working as Chief of Research at that same MAR. According to rumors, she accounted for some 40 percent of the research produced at MAR’s Itogami branch.

“I am Veldiana, daughter of the late Frist Caruana, lord of the Duchy of Caruana of the Warlord’s Empire. It is an honor to meet you, ma’am.”

As she formally introduced herself, the beautiful woman in the suit extended her right hand. Yet, she looked at Veldiana with an expressionless gaze, sighing in apparent discomfort.

“I am Tooyama, her assistant. This is Chief Mimori Akatsuki.”

“...Eh?”

As the stunning woman in the suit introduced herself, Velidana noticed a

woman with a cherubic face wearing a wrinkled white gown behind her. Thanks to poor grooming, her long hair was something of a mess. Her eyelids were not fully open, like someone who had just gotten out of bed. She was holding the stick of an already-eaten ice cream in her mouth like others would hold a cigarette. Even a foreigner like Veldiana could tell at one glance that she was a slovenly adult.

“Y—you are Mimori Akatsuki? The profile stated that you have two children...?!”

Veldiana was taken aback as she posed the question.

Her image of the woman as a cool-headed, talented researcher cracked and fell to pieces. The woman wearing the white gown seemed like a high-maintenance child; she could scarcely imagine her raising her own children.

However, Mimori Akatsuki nodded crisply in reply.

“Mm-hmm, that’s right. Kojou is in the third year of middle school, and Nagisa is a year below.”

“R-right...”

“Nice to meet you, Miss Caruana. You don’t mind if I call you Vivi, do you? Yes, yes, here is a token of our coming closer together.”

Saying this, Mimori fished out a new ice cream stick from a portable cooler box.

For a moment, Veldiana’s mind was captivated by the ice cream offered to her, but the reaction of Tooyama, standing beside them, scared her off. Veldiana put aside her considerable lingering attachment and weakly shook her head.

“No...I must respectfully decline. We are in a café, after all.”

“Mm-hmmmm... I suppose we are.”

Mimori Akatsuki readily accepted her answer and shut the cooler’s lid. She sat in the chair opposite Veldiana and placed an order with the waitstaff as her assistant, Tooyama, began to speak.

“You really made a scene...”



Veldiana's body shrank, as if trying to escape from that woman's gaze.

“—An industrial road in Island North was caved in, and a pedestrian walkway collapsed. Surrounding residential areas had power outages for up to four hours. Thanks to delays in the shipment of raw materials, our company's operations were impacted. We also had to assign staff to aid the police in their investigation.”

“W...wait a minute—that was...”

“Pemptos...the fifth Kaleid Blood's handiwork, yes? And you are a mere victim wrapped up in it?”

“Th-that's right.”

Veldiana nodded firmly.

It had been almost exactly one day since she'd sustained that assault. She had been tailing Kojou Akatsuki when she was attacked by a vampire controlling an incredibly powerful Beast Vassal. She was what Veldiana and her kind called Pemptos, one of the elements of the Fourth Primogenitor.

“I never dreamed that Pemptos would attack in a public place like that. It was impossible to predict. Certainly, I will concede that it was because I was bringing *that* in, using an unconventional route, but...”

“I understand. It's not as if we're here to demand an apology and financial compensation, after all.”

Veldiana patted her chest in relief at Tooyama's businesslike explanation. Even if they had demanded damages for their losses, Veldiana lacked the finances to pay them.

“Mm-hmm... I wonder if it's acceptable to believe that the Key you have, stolen from your very own 'king,' is genuine.” Mimori Akatsuki asked with a grin as her sleepy eyes narrowed.

Veldiana drew in her chin as she took something out of her coat pocket: a metal stick wrapped in coarse cloth. It was about three to four centimeters thick and under fifteen centimeters long. Tapered at one end, it seemed like a small stake. Minute magical symbols were engraved into its silver-glowing

surface.

“Hmm... So this is the Key to the coffin?”

“Yes. One of the legacies of the Devas, of which there are only three in the entire world—a primogenitor-slaying holy lance able to nullify demonic energy and rend any barrier.”

Veldiana’s voice was hard as she spoke.

The silver-colored metal stake was a precious heirloom passed down in her family from one generation to the next. It was pretty much the only valuable thing she had left.

“I’d heard that just the descendants of Methuselah could use it.”

“Yes. I was told as much.”

Veldiana lowered her eyes at Mimori Akatsuki’s comment.

It took a great deal of spiritual energy, at a high level of purity, to make that divine object function. In the first place, it had been created not by humans, but by a race of demigods called Devas, ancient super-humans who had become extinct before recorded history. Either way, it wasn’t something a demon like Veldiana could use.

“Hmm.” Conflicted, Mimori pursed her lips. “So a precious spirit medium inheriting genes passed down from the Devas—that really does mean very few people. You don’t see many of those around, even in this Demon Sanctuary.”

“But Gajou’s daughter is—”

“Mm? Gajou...?”

Mimori’s ears twitched at Veldiana’s familiarity when she had spoken his name. She grinned, extending her arm toward the woman as she stared at her.

Veldiana, feeling very afraid of her smile for some reason, quickly shook her head.

Gajou Akatsuki was Kojou Akatsuki’s father. In other words, that made him Mimori’s husband. However, the two had apparently lived apart for several years. She was probably suspecting some form of infidelity because of how

casually Veldiana had bandied around his first name.

Of course, Veldiana was not in any kind of improper relationship with Gajou. So she figured there was no point trying to hide anything, but it was true that a string of “occurrences” since she’d met that man gave her a bit of a guilty conscience. Occurrences such as how, in the course of fleeing from a common enemy, they’d ended up nestled close, he’d seen her naked, she’d ended up drinking his blood... Things like that.

“M-my apologies. I had heard that your and Mr. Akatsuki’s daughter had activated the seal at the ruins on Gozo.”

Veldiana tried to spur the conversation forward, even as she became slick with sweat.

Gozo Island, the world’s most ancient Demon Sanctuary, sitting in the Mediterranean Sea—

It was both the place where the coffin of the twelfth Kaleid Blood had been discovered, and where Veldiana’s older sister—Liana Caruana—had lost her life.

“Yes, I see, certainly Nagisa might have used the thing in the past.” Mimori closed her eyes and sighed. “But it won’t work.”

“What do you mean, it won’t work?”

“Nagisa lost her power due to the incident on Gozo. For that matter, she’s in poor health and hospitalized right now.”

“Ah...”

Veldiana was filled with regret as she realized she’d made a slip of the tongue. Her sister was one of many casualties from the beast-man-supremacist terrorist raid on the Gozo Island ruin, and Kojou and Nagisa Akatsuki had both been there at the time. She knew they’d been injured, but she had not anticipated that Nagisa would lose her spiritual abilities as a result.

“Isn’t the surest way to be certain of opening the Fairy’s Coffin by relying on the Lion King Agency? They’re famously rumored to have gathered together and raised descendants of Methuselah for quite some time. That’s why the agency was tasked with being the Bookmaker for the banquet, too...”

Mimori stated the facts bluntly.

“The Lion King Agency... But they...”

“You asked them for aid, and they said no, right? Of course they didn’t help. The Duchy of Caruana of the Warlord’s Empire has already been seized by others. There can be no wager if there are no suitable stakes.”

“B-but if your company was to offer its assistance—”

Tooyama coldly interrupted her words, “Veldiana Caruana, allow me to state MAR’s public position concerning that. We have no intention of awakening the Sleeping Princess.”

“What...?”

Veldiana’s face went pale. *Sleeping Princess* was the nickname for the twelfth Kaleid Blood administered by the MAR lab. She was a prototype Fourth Primogenitor—itsself the World’s Mightiest Vampire, fashioned by the three vampire primogenitors and the Devas.

But at the moment she was sealed away in the block of ice known as the Fairy’s Coffin. Veldiana had sacrificed much to make her way to the Far East Demon Sanctuary in order to awaken her. And yet—

“But that’s—?! Why...?!”

“Our company stands to profit greatly from her as a precious test subject. It would be foolish to court her loss due to unforeseen circumstances. I believe it is a natural judgment by a for-profit corporation.”

“Ugh...”

Veldiana had no rebuttal for Tooyama’s businesslike statements. The twelfth Kaleid Blood was a masterpiece of the sorcerous technology of the Devas. Her value as a specimen was incalculable. To them, it was far more profitable for her to remain asleep.

“Furthermore, the Key that you possess is something we value rather highly. I wonder, would you consider selling it to us? Of course, you could name your price.”

Tooyama’s expression did not change as she spoke. Veldiana’s eyes tinged red

with anger.

“Who would sell such a thing to misers like you?!”

Veldiana clutched the metal stake as she glared at Tooyama, who gazed at her as if she were a rather curious creature.

“Your possession of it is meaningless. You’re a demon; you cannot use it.”

“That’s none of your business!”

“I see. It would appear negotiations are at an impasse. A pity,” Tooyama said without emotion.

“Yes, that’s right. I’m sorry to have wasted your time.”

Veldiana rose up from her chair in a huff, on the verge of storming out. But Mimori Akatsuki clapped her hands with a cheerful expression that seemed completely out of place.

“Oops, I almost forgot. Tooyama, bring it out.”

“Yes.”

Tooyama opened her aluminum attaché case and took a long, slender, beat-up cardboard box out of it. The box had several international mailing stickers on it, like it had been shipped from some remote corner of the globe.

“This arrived from Gajou, addressed to you.”

“From Gajou?”

Veldiana’s brows rose as she accepted the box. She opened it, heedless of the renewed twitch of Mimori’s cheek.

The cardboard box contained a glossy black metal hunting implement. It was a dangerous-looking “bow” with a stock resembling that of a rifle. Inside was another tool—a slender, metallic tube. It was less than fifteen centimeters long, with three small stabilizer fins; just the right size for the metal stake in Veldiana’s hand to fit within it.

“A crossbow and... What is this?”

“A cartridge. It apparently uses the same principles as a spell gun cartridge, employing the spiritual energy sealed within as an extender for a holy lance. It

can only be used once before being discarded, but the energy within is theoretically capable of activating the Key. My goodness, what priestess did he trick into putting her spiritual energy into this—”

“Mm-hmmm.” Mimori sighed in annoyance.

Without a word, Veldiana held up the container Mimori had called a cartridge. At a casual glance, it looked like nothing more than a pile of metal, but she could tell that the interior was infused with incredible spiritual energy.

With that much power, the chances of her activating the Key to the coffin were high. She could awaken the twelfth Kaleid Blood without relying on the auspices of a spiritualist.

However, the person unleashing so much spiritual energy at point blank range would not emerge unscathed. It would inflict lethal damage to demons like Veldiana in particular. Therefore, it was necessary to accurately fire the Key at the Fairy’s Coffin from a distance—without a doubt, that was what the crossbow was for.

“With this...I can open the lid of the coffin...”

Veldiana’s body trembled as she clenched the metal container.

Backed into a corner, she could not have asked for better help. Yet, at the same time, she felt conflicted. Mimori and Tooyama were declining cooperation, so why were they handing Veldiana something like this...?

Mimori murmured, musing to herself, “We have no intention of awakening the Sleeping Princess ourselves. Making enemies out of the Lion King Agency and the other elements would be a lot of trouble, after all.”

Then her eyes crinkled into a teasing smile, fixing Veldiana with a suggestive look.

“But if an outsider were to break into the lab without permission and open the coffin lid all on her own, well, it would be out of our hands, wouldn’t it?”

“Ma’am...you...,” Veldiana blurted, realizing Mimori Akatsuki’s true intent.

She would break into the MAR lab and destroy the coffin without anyone’s say-so. Breaking and entering, destruction of property, industrial sabotage—she



had no idea how many crimes it would include, but if she put on the detestable mantle of criminality, she could awaken the twelfth Kaleid Blood from her sleep. Without a word, Mimori Akatsuki was asking her if she was willing to go that far.

Veldiana's reply was a certainty. She did not hesitate.

After all, one way or another, it was the only choice she could bring herself to make.

## 2

The twilight shone into the small room. There, lying atop a bed at the center, Nagisa Akatsuki slept.

She was small, even for a thirteen-year-old, and had a bit of a childish air. Her long black hair was strewn across her unadorned white shirt. Her slender arms, poking out from her pajamas, were still connected to intravenous tubes. Kojou Akatsuki sighed as he gazed at the side of her face.

It had been just the previous weekend when Nagisa had collapsed at school. It was the fourth time she'd been hospitalized that year. Ever since the heavy injuries she'd suffered three years prior, she'd fallen ill numerous times. Apparently, even the Demon Sanctuary's cutting-edge medical treatments had difficulty completely healing her.

"Huh? ...Kojou? When did you get here?"

Finally, Nagisa noticed Kojou's presence, gently rolling over as she opened her eyes. She let a small yawn escape as she looked up at Kojou, there in his school uniform, as if she found that strange.

"I just got here. Sorry, I'm a little late."

Kojou brought his hands together as he spoke.

Lately, dropping by the hospital to see Nagisa on his way home from school was Kojou's daily ritual. However, that day, he'd been wrapped up in preparations for the Harrowing Festival, which had postponed his arrival. He had only a little time left before visiting hours were over.

Despite this, Nagisa didn't scold Kojou. With an amused smile, she said, "Oh. That's too bad. If you'd come sooner, I would've let you wipe my back with a steamy towel. Special service, just for you."

"What kind of consolation prize is that supposed to be...?"

Kojou exhaled with an exasperated look. As it was, Kojou had no interest at all in his preteen little sister. Besides, Nagisa looked too much like a little girl to be sexy.

"It's just you today, Kojou? Where's Asagi?"

Nagisa, puffing her cheeks at Kojou's effortless parry, slowly sat up. Kojou switched the pillow around, letting Nagisa use it as a cushion to support her back.

"Asagi's at a part-time job. This is a gift from her. It's the latest model."

"Wow, really?! Tell Asagi thanks for me! I was wondering why she didn't come yesterday. This is a mahjong manga, and that's the gourmet tavern one."

"...Geez, it's like you're both old men... Well, it's fine." Kojou grimaced and smiled resignedly at the manga interests both girls stubbornly held.

Since childhood, Nagisa's vice had been her talkativeness, and even then, weakened by illness, that hadn't changed very much. But her cheerfulness made things a lot easier for Kojou and other family members.

"You're more chipper than I thought."

"Yeah. Sorry for all the trouble. They're doing the usual hospital tests. I think I'll be able to leave by this weekend." Then she gave a small giggle and blushed a little.

"That's fine and dandy, but don't push yourself."

"It's all right. I have Mimori coming to see me when I'm here, too."

"Well, she's technically the head of the medical team..."

On top of being the MAR research director, their mother, Mimori Akatsuki, was a medical psychometer, and had a medical degree for good measure. All of those things made Mimori frighteningly busy, so she spent most weekends at

the MAR lab, often sleeping at the hospital attached to it. While hospitalized there, Nagisa was able to see her mother's face on a daily basis, one of the saving graces of her hospital life.

"I'm more worried about you, Kojou. As soon as I'm not there, you sleep with the windows open, you don't hang the laundry to dry, your room gets messy, and the garbage piles up. And you have to remember to do your homework and brush your teeth before you sleep."

"What, am I in kindergarten?!"

Kojou's lips twisted in dissatisfaction at his little sister's serious, worried look. Despite his response, it was true that his room fell to pieces when Nagisa the Neat Freak wasn't around; he couldn't voice a very strong argument.

Nagisa abruptly changed the subject. "Come to think of it, I saw something on TV. That explosion a couple days ago was really something, huh?"

Given her great love of her own voice, she'd no doubt been eagerly waiting to talk to someone about it.

"Ah, you mean the one that caved in the road?"

Kojou grimaced as he nodded.

Two days earlier, there had been a large explosion right near that very same hospital.

The pedestrian bridge near the blast had been annihilated without a trace, and the road itself had caved in, like something had punched down into it. Kojou and Asagi, who had just happened to be visiting Nagisa that day, had a really hard time, unable to get home until late at night due to road closures.

"Probably a foul-up by the construction company. Maybe an underground pipe ruptured, gas leaked out, and static electricity made it catch fire and explode."

"Oh, you think so? You don't think it's a meteorite strike?"

"Huh? Meteorite?"

Nagisa's outlandish opinion left Kojou dumbfounded. He wondered if it was some kind of joke, but Nagisa looked up at him seriously.

“On top of that, some people say a UFO was spotted over the blast area, and aliens collected the bodies. It looks like the Gigafloat Management Corporation is covering it up. That’s what Mimori said.”

“...Like you should believe anything that idiot tells you. You won’t find many stories that crazy floating around, even on the Internet.”

“Eh, it’s not true?”

This time, it was Nagisa’s turn to be dumbfounded. “Waaaah!” she shouted, diving under a blanket, perhaps embarrassed at having been deceived.

“Oh yeah...I kind of thought it was odd, too. But still! If the time had been just a little bit different, you and Asagi would’ve gotten involved in that incident, so be careful, ’kay?”

“I don’t think being careful is enough, at that level. If we get involved in something like that...”

Kojou, who’d seen the site of the incident for himself, didn’t beat around the bush.

“Well, be careful anyway!”

“Yeah, yeah, sure thing. Well, it’s not like that happens every day, y’know.” Kojou acknowledged his little sister’s unreasonable request in a flippant tone.

A moment later, a siren resembling a fire alarm rang out inside the facility.

“—And as soon as I say that, something else happens?!”

Kojou, shocked by the all-too-perfect timing, rushed to the windowsill.

The siren wasn’t ringing in Nagisa’s medical wing, but rather, it was coming from the direction of the huge adjacent structure—the MAR lab.

MAR was a giant conglomerate dealing not only with medical technology but with an extensive array of sorcerous products. Kojou wondered if an incident arising inside such a lab might spell trouble. He really had no idea what kind of dangerous things might come crawling out.

But when Kojou looked back anxiously, he was greeted by the sight of his little sister falling to the bed, clutching her chest in pain.

“Nagisa?!”

She looked pale, even for her, as if blood had completely stopped flowing to her face. Her breathing was rough, and her back wouldn't stop shivering.

“I'm...all right... I'm just a little...surprised...”

“You sure as hell don't look all right. Just wait, I'll call somebody, so—”

Kojou desperately tried to maintain his composure as he looked around for the button to alert the nurse. But the door opened before he could find it.

A tall woman wearing a white gown entered Nagisa's hospital room, her face remaining neutral.

“...Mrs. Tooyama?”

“I heard Kojou's voice from the corridor. Is Nagisa all right?” Miwa Tooyama, an MAR researcher, replied casually.

Mimori Akatsuki's assistant was a fairly familiar face to Kojou and Nagisa. An unflappable sort, she never let one feel much humanity from her, but her tranquility was reassuring under the circumstances.

As Tooyama began examining Nagisa, Kojou asked, “So what's with that siren just now?”

He didn't really expect her to have any information, but Tooyama surprised him with a prompt reply.

“An intruder has been confirmed inside the main laboratory building.”

“An intruder...?”

“The guards are searching for the suspect, but there is presently no risk to the medical wing. However, it is possible the intruder could flee this way. Also, they could be carrying explosives or the like, so safety cannot be completely guaranteed.”

“E-explosives...?! ”

Kojou's entire body stiffened at Tooyama's terribly blunt explanation. Strictly speaking, she was merely laying out the worst case, but neither Kojou nor Nagisa could laugh that off. After all, they'd already experienced an attack by

explosive-wielding terrorists four years prior.

“Therefore, I think we should move Nagisa to the intensive care unit just to be safe. It is guarded around the clock and shall be prioritized in case there’s any trouble.”

“Y-yeah. If that’s so, then—”

Kojou’s expression remained stiff and tense as he nodded. If Nagisa could not be evacuated from the hospital, Tooyama’s suggestion was surely the best option.

Nagisa made painful little coughs as she said weakly, “Sorry, Kojou. You came all the way to see me and everything...”

Kojou forced a smile as he patted her on the head.

“Don’t worry about it. Just tell Mom to gimme a call when things calm down.”

“Yeah.”

“And this is the school uniform you wanted me to take back home?”

“Yeah. I’ll leave the washing to you. Also, the North Pole Store at the West Gate has a half-off sale on Wednesday, so don’t forget to go. I have a coupon for it inside the drawer in the kitchen.”

“That’s a tall order...”

Kojou sighed, half in appreciation of how, even in that situation, his little sister was as wordy as ever.

In the meantime, the nurses Mrs. Tooyama called had arrived, switching Nagisa to a stretcher. They carried her out, leaving only Kojou and Tooyama in the room.

Then, Tooyama suddenly said with a serious expression, “The security level inside the hospital has been increased. It may be safer not to leave for the time being. Please change into your little sister’s pajamas, sniff the scent of her pillow, and spend as much time here as you like.”

The surprise attack elicited a dry cough from Kojou.

“Don’t ask people to do perverted things like that so seriously! I’m not



interested in that stuff!”

“...Eh?!”

“Don’t ‘eh’ me! Why do you look *that* surprised?!” Kojou lamented, glaring at the blank-faced Tooyama.

Her position as Mimori’s assistant made Tooyama a weirdo to begin with. He didn’t get along with her because he could never tell whether she was serious or not.

“Well then, if you are returning home, please use the medical wing passage. This ID will get you through.”

“Ah, right... Got it.”

Kojou was still wondering if she was going to resume her scent-fetish teasing when he accepted the pass card.

The medical wing was in the block on the opposite side of the lab. The odds of encountering an intruder certainly were slim. He’d heard that outsiders were forbidden entry, even if they were family members of researchers, but this was no doubt a special emergency exception. Tooyama might have been going out of her way to visit Nagisa’s hospital room just to hand Kojou that card.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me,” she stated as she left.

Kojou, having tucked the pass card into his uniform’s pocket, clutched his head in exasperation.

A moment later, he felt a shot of brutal pain around the right side of his rib cage.

“Ugh...?!”

It was more heat than pain, like being impaled by a sharp spear. Unable to bear it, Kojou fell against a wall in anguish. Simultaneously, a bizarre image resurfaced in the back of his mind.

A girl sleeping inside a giant ice block. A silver stake impaling it. A dazzling light. Pure, white, cold.

Like a billowing flame, her hair changed colors as it danced inside the ice, and

snow scattered all around.

Then, her beautiful eyes opened. Eyes burning with a pale, blue flame—

“What...the—?!”

Kojou groaned out, clutching his forehead.

A moment later...

With a great roar, the ground shook, sending an incredible jolt up into the hospital.

### 3

“Shit...”

Kojou wobbled on his feet as he headed toward the medical wing.

The torrent of visions had vanished, but the pain in his ribs had sharply increased. His heart was beating loud enough to shake his eardrums. His entire body felt like it was on fire, as if every drop of blood was boiling.

“This way...maybe?”

He had no idea where he was going. However, he felt like someone was calling to him the whole time. He continued onward; it was as if a minute voice was making his legs move.

With the pass card he’d just received, he walked through the automated gate.

The interior of the building was dark—perhaps the power was out due to the previous explosion. The unfamiliar route ahead became labyrinthine. Even so, Kojou continued without hesitation.

Particles of dust danced in the passage. Coarse, strange scents struck his nostrils. The building was cracked in various places, and part of the passage had caved in.

Kojou tripped over a piece of rubble as he advanced deeper.

There was no sign of other humans in the passage. It was as if the darkness and debris blocked all outside intrusion.

At some point, white mist began to appear, suspended in the darkness. The

cold pricked his skin as if it was freezing him.

“Ice...?”

Ice covered the walls and floor of the passage, with thick frost coating the metal connecting joints. Tiny snow crystals like flower petals mixed with the hazy air.

Countless pillars of ice sprung from the surface of the floor, like sharp thorns keeping interlopers at bay. Kojou stopped.

He was inside a fairly large room, one that was on par with a school classroom. The unadorned interior had countless wooden boxes and the like piled up within. Apparently, this section was being used as a warehouse.

At the center of the room were stairs leading underground, and large cracks ran along the floor surrounding it. The air was frigid there, colder than anywhere else in the room. It was probably where the blast originated.

The concrete beneath his feet was fragile, possibly due to the sudden drop in temperature. Judging that any further approach was futile, Kojou slowly examined his surroundings.

Somewhere along the way, the heat in his body had abated. The pain in his ribs had vanished, too. Yet...

“Is...someone there?”

Kojou’s voice echoed amid the white mist. As if to answer his call, he heard faint footsteps from someone stepping on what sounded like fresh snow.

“...Huh?!”

When Kojou looked back, he opened his eyes in shock and froze completely.

Without a word, she stood in the rays of the sinking sun pouring through the warehouse’s sunroof: a young girl with delicate, fairylike features.

Her limbs were as thin as a child’s, her physique was slender, and her eyes were as pale blue as a glacier. Her hair was colored faintly blond; like a rainbow, it seemed to change color depending on the angle. She possessed an inhumanly beautiful face, something that seemed straight out of a Western painting, the kind of beauty that inspired awe on an instinctive level.

Kojou stood unsteadily as he moaned out, “Why...do I know you...?!”

Once more, countless visions poured into his brain.

He knew her.

He had met her long before, somewhere else. Somewhere stained with violence, slaughter, and blood—

“Gah?!”

The girl gently stepped forward. Previously shrouded in pure, white mist, the entirety of her willowy body became visible. That instant, Kojou’s expression contorted out of nervousness, because he finally realized the girl wasn’t wearing a single stitch of clothing. Her slightly visible ribs, the faint swell of her breasts, her skin so pale that you could almost see through her... She was completely naked, her whole body fully exposed to Kojou’s eyes.

“W-wait...”

Kojou put a hand out to try to stop her, but the girl’s feet did not halt. Nor could Kojou look away; he was entranced by her, unable to move, not unlike drones captivated by their queen bee.

“Shit... At a time like this...”

Kojou suddenly found it hard to breathe. A metallic scent assaulted his nostrils; the taste of blood spread throughout his mouth. He was bleeding from his nose.

The causes were probably the precipitous drop in temperature and the accompanying shift in air pressure, plus the stress related to the bizarre situation before him. He wanted to think that it was *not* because he was aroused at seeing her nude.

The girl made a wry smile when she saw the expression on Kojou’s face. It was a pretty smile that suited her elfin looks, but somehow, it seemed malicious.

With Kojou unable to move, the girl walked to him with surprising speed, drawing her face near his. White, gleaming fangs protruded from her shapely lips.

The soft feeling of her lips pressing against him kept Kojou frozen stiff and

unresponsive.

After a time, the girl pulled back from Kojou. A thin line of fresh, glossy blood trickled from the edge of her mouth. She licked it off, narrowing her eyes in obvious satisfaction.



Kojou's voice quivered as he realized what the girl before his eyes really was.

"You...drank my blood...?!"

She was a demon. More than that, she was an unregistered vampire wielding immense, off-the-charts power.

The explosion rocking the hospital and the cold, icy air were probably manifestations of the awakening of her demonic power. Even Kojou, a resident of a Demon Sanctuary, had never before encountered such a powerful vampire.

Kojou resigned himself to death at her hands. She was an unregistered demon; the Demon Sanctuary's laws held no sway over her. Neither the monitoring network spread over the island nor the Attack Mages of the Island Guard could protect him now.

Even if she was small in stature, a Demon's physical prowess was overwhelming. She'd never need to use a vampire's Beast Vassal. She could easily rip Kojou apart with her bare hands.

But her next action was not the one Kojou expected.

Her eyes blinked heavily, as if she'd just woken up. She looked at Kojou, standing right before her, and timidly backed away from him.

"U...a..."

The girl let out an unsteady cry as she hid her bare breasts with both arms. She was nothing like the girl who had just licked Kojou's trickling blood with a malevolent smile. Now, she looked like a completely different person: a helpless, insecure child.

"You're..."

Kojou couldn't hide his bewilderment over her sudden about-face.

Instantly, a mysterious, unprecedented, and ferocious sense of guilt overcame Kojou. If a stranger saw them at that exact moment, the individual would surely be convinced he had assaulted the naked girl.

And as if fulfilling Kojou's worst fears, a presence emerged behind him at that very moment: a woman wearing a black coat, pointing something like a gun at



Kojou as she shouted:

“—Don’t move!”

“Ah?!”

Kojou reflexively raised both hands into the air as he looked back.

The person standing there was a young, seductive brunette. Her face was chiseled and refined but surprisingly young; Kojou would have guessed she was only two or three years older than he.

The woman was pointing a black, metallic crossbow at him. But it wasn’t loaded. It was a bluff, a mere threat.

Kojou glared at her. “You’re a vampire, too, huh? So you’re the intruders barging into the lab?”

Strangely, he felt no fear. In spite of the lady-spy-chic clothing she wore, there was no aura of violence coming from the girl. On the contrary, she felt like a soft, spoiled little girl whose defenses were hardly impervious.

The woman did not answer Kojou, posing her own question instead.

“Just to be certain—you are Kojou Akatsuki, correct?”

Kojou blinked in surprise. He subconsciously checked to make sure he wasn’t wearing some kind of name tag.

“How do you know my name?”

“I am Veldiana Caruana, the daughter of Duke Caruana of the Warlord’s Empire.”

“Caruana...?!”

Her words threw Kojou off. Of course, it was the first time he had met the vampire who stood before his eyes.

If she was related to the Duke of the Warlord’s Empire, she was a pureblood descendant of the First Primogenitor, the Lost Warlord—not the sort of person Kojou, a mere middle school student, ought to have as an acquaintance.

And yet, he felt like he’d seen her before.

Put more precisely, he knew someone who really resembled her: a beautiful female researcher, with her own brunette hair cut short. Someone who had risked her life to protect Kojou and Nagisa...

“I am aware you have lost your memories of Gozo Island. Perhaps you cannot remember, but I want you to believe me: I am not your enemy, nor do I have any intention of causing harm to MAR.”

Kojou glanced around his miserable surroundings and sighed in apparent disbelief.

“No intention of causing harm... So, what, the underground explosion wasn’t you?”

Veldiana averted her gaze with a guilty expression.

“Th-that girl was held captive. I merely wanted to bring her out with me.”

Veldiana pointed to the blond vampire girl as she spoke. The girl’s shoulders twitched and trembled; for some reason, she hid behind Kojou’s back.

“...Held captive? You mean, she was a patient here?”

“If I must be specific, ‘guinea pig’ might be more accurate...”

Veldiana narrowed her eyes with a pitying look as she gazed at the blond girl.

“She’s an MAR research subject? Because she’s a vampire?”

“Yes, that is correct. That girl is not normal, but rather, a very special vampire.”

Veldiana, apparently judging that Kojou had no hostile intent, lowered the crossbow in her hand. That was when Kojou noticed the fresh blood trickling down her right arm.

“That wound... Did a guard shoot you?”

Veldiana pressed her left hand against the open wound and snarled, “Do not underestimate a vampire’s healing ability. A wound like this will heal soon enough.”

However, she seemed to be in considerable pain. When he looked closer, he noticed her eyes were watering.

Kojou tediously shook his head and glared at her.

“...Maybe if it was a normal wound, but this is a Demon Sanctuary. There’s no way they weren’t using special anti-demon rounds.”

“I suppose you’re right. That’s why I don’t want to expose her to danger if at all possible.”

Veldiana accepted Kojou’s statement with surprising ease. Then, she folded the crossbow and presented it to him.

“Please. Work with me, Kojou Akatsuki.”

“Work with...?”

Even as Kojou snatched the crossbow away from her, he was confused, unable to discern her true intent. Put bluntly, her relinquishing the unloaded crossbow had startled him.

“I want you to take her and escape. I will distract the guards. Use the opening to get her out of here somehow. If you’re Gajou’s son, you can surely do that much.”

“Huh?”

*What does Dad have to do with this?* Kojou wondered, even more bewildered. Regardless, things were somehow starting to make sense. If the vampiress was an acquaintance of Gajou, that’d explain how she knew Kojou’s name. *So it figures that her personality is just a little off*, he thought.

Then, perhaps taking Kojou’s silence for a yes, Veldiana walked away from him and the girl on her way out.

“Get her somewhere safe. I will come for her later.”

“Hey, wait!”

Kojou urgently objected. Nothing but trouble could come from having this buck-naked girl pushed onto him with no explanation.

“Explain things a little, dammit! Why are you just assuming I’m gonna help —?!”

“There’s no time to explain!” Veldiana shouted right back with a twinge of

annoyance. Behind Kojou, the blond girl twitched and shuddered in apparent fright. Irritated, Veldiana sighed. “I’ll tell you this, at least. You have a duty to protect her.”

“What ‘duty’?”

“If I say that only she can save Nagisa Akatsuki, would you accept it?”

“...What do you mean?”

Kojou’s expression morphed into a snarl as he glared back at Veldiana.

His temperament had changed the instant she invoked his little sister’s name. The force rising in Kojou’s eyes, resembling bloodlust, made the vampiress’s words catch in her throat.

“E-exactly what I said. Nagisa Akatsuki’s debilitation cannot be treated by medicine, even with the Demon Sanctuary’s technology. If anything, it is amazing that she is still alive. One day soon, she shall perish.”

“Nagisa’s going to...die...?”

Kojou grunted and clenched his fist. His mouth couldn’t form a rebuttal.

No one had come out and told him, but he would have been lying if he said he hadn’t realized this.

Nagisa’s body was weakening, slowly but surely.

Her wounds from the incident three years prior had healed, but her physical energy had never returned. It was as if Nagisa had continued to bleed from an invisible wound all that time, her very life essence draining away moment by moment, even with Mimori Akatsuki and MAR’s medical technology doing their utmost to prolong her life.

“With her, you can save Nagisa?” Kojou asked, pointing to the blond girl.

The girl seemed ignorant of the circumstances as she uncomfortably lowered her eyes. Veldiana stared at her and said nonetheless:

“She is the twelfth Kaleid Blood... Her name is Avrora Florestina.”

“...Avrora?”

Kojou felt a dull throb from the right side of his rib cage. Once again, he had

hallucinations—or flashbacks—from the recesses of his mind. The girl floating in ice. The Sleeping Princess. Avrora Florestina—Kojou *knew* that name.

“My sovereign, please permit me to leave your side for the moment.”

Veldiana knelt before the timid girl, offering the girl her own coat.

“A... U...”

With a frail voice, the girl continued hiding behind Kojou. It appeared that she really didn’t understand the situation she’d been placed in. She seemed to have difficulty judging if Veldiana was her ally.

Perhaps thinking she had to say *something*, the girl shakily opened her mouth. In a beautiful, clear, high-pitched voice, she said:

“I-I permit it.”

## 4

“Three minutes from now, I shall summon a Beast Vassal in front of the laboratory—”

And with that, Veldiana vanished. It was a simple decoy operation. Her spectacular rampage would draw the guards away while Kojou brought the blond girl—Avrora—out the back.

The tactic was straightforward, and with security believing there was only one intruder, it was likely to be effective. He was genuinely grateful that Tooyama had lent him her medical wing pass card.

Furthermore, it seemed there was no need for Kojou and Avrora to fear pursuit from the guards if they made it off MAR property. Only a tiny handful of researchers even knew of Avrora’s existence, and keeping an unregistered demon confined was criminal to begin with.

Kojou wasn’t sure if he could trust a vampire he’d just met, but at the very least, it seemed that Veldiana really did know Gajou. Besides, it wasn’t in his nature to just abandon the fainthearted girl. If she really could save Nagisa, it was worth risking his life over.

“That said, we can’t go far with you looking like that. Gotta get some clothes

on you if I'm gonna take you outside..."

Kojou gazed at Avrora, naked under a leather coat, and lightly clutched his head. Avrora simply stood out too much. If Kojou led the girl around town in such provocative attire, he'd be arrested as a sex offender long before the unregistered-demon part came to light.

Plus, Veldiana's bullet-for-hire coat wasn't designed for concealing flesh. The slightest movement would expose Avrora's breasts and crotch.

*What am I gonna do?* he pondered as he gazed at the girl.

"D-do not lay your indecent gaze upon me...!"

Avrora turned her back to Kojou as she lodged a timid protest. Her manner of speech was regal, but her frightened, shaky tone made it difficult for her to sound haughty.

"Ah, sorry..."

*So she does have a sense of shame*, Kojou mused, oddly admiring her for that. Apparently, she wasn't her normal self when she'd licked off Kojou's nosebleed. But when he thought about it rationally, having a naked girl, vampire or not, press her lips against him was a crazy experience. He pondered in anguish whether such a thing counted as a kiss, but he told himself to forget about it for the time being.

"I see... Right, I have Nagisa's..."

Kojou lowered the schoolbag he was carrying, taking out something packed within: the school uniform Nagisa had asked Kojou to wash. It was the one she'd worn when she'd collapsed at school, but it barely had a speck of dirt on it.

"Anyway, put this on. It's my little sister's, but it beats wearing nothing but a coat."

"A, u... V-very well."

An expression of relief came over the vampire girl as she received the uniform.

Nagisa was smaller than girls her own age, but her physique wasn't that

different from Avrora's. Surely Avrora would be able to get the outfit on. Yet, as Kojou waited with his back turned, Avrora spent a long time changing.

Not much remained of Veldiana's promised three minutes. Even Kojou began to get irritated when he heard Avrora's voice. She sounded as if she could break into tears at any moment.

"K-Kojou Akatsuki... I-I permit an exception to my warning to thee."

"Huh?" Kojou turned and stared at her dubiously. "What're you talking about?"

Avrora was still holding the collar of the school uniform with a frightful expression. Apparently, she didn't know how to button the uniform, putting her in quite a bind.

Having successfully deciphered Avrora's mystery language, he languidly said, "Ah... You want me to fasten your buttons?"

*Talk in a way that's easier to understand, sheesh*, crossed his mind, of course, but she was no doubt a vampire born in a foreign country. He should be grateful to understand what she meant at all.

Kojou was closing the uniform's buttons when he suddenly thought of something.

"Hey, you're a vampire, too, right? Can't you turn into mist to move around like Veldiana did earlier?"

He'd heard that a comparatively large number of vampires had that special ability. If Avrora could turn into mist and hide from sight, taking her out of the building would get easier by leaps and bounds.

However, the vampire girl shook her head, lowering her eyes in a deeply apologetic look.

"I-I do not possess the grace of mist."

"That so... Well, if you can't, you can't."

*What era is that Japanese from?* Kojou wondered, but he didn't dwell on it. Deciphering was a bit of a pain, but one way or another, he knew what she was trying to say.



“Anyway, it’s time. I think we should be as out in the open as possible. That way people won’t suspect anything.”

“V-very well.”

Her words were as haughty as ever, but Avrora was desperately clinging to Kojou’s uniform, which meant Kojou was dragged back the instant he tried to begin walking.

“Hey, you...!”

Kojou looked back and glared at Avrora. She whimpered, shrinking back like a small, frightened animal.

A moment later, a new siren echoed throughout the medical wing.

Apparently, Veldiana had summoned a Beast Vassal and begun wreaking havoc as promised. If they didn’t get off MAR property in a hurry, the gate might seal them in, and nothing good would come from that.

“Geez, I just said we’ve gotta do this in the open. If you’re clinging to me like that, people’ll get suspicious for sure! And at least walk, dammit!”

“Hi...u...”

Kojou’s coarse shout nearly made Avrora cry. Her big, blue eyes filled with tears, but even so, she replied in a fleeting voice, “A-Avrora...”

“Ah?”

“I am not ‘you’... I am Avrora Florestina. R-respect my name...”

Apparently, it had taken her considerable courage just to express that much. The latter part of her speech was so broken that he could barely hear them at all.

Put another way, she might have taken such a special liking to the name Avrora that she *needed* to hear Kojou say it.

“I get it... I was wrong. Sorry.”

This said, Kojou extended his hand to the tearful girl. Even then, the timid vampire girl retreated a step, leaving Kojou somewhat at a loss.

“C’mon. Let’s go, Avrora.”

That moment, he felt like it was the first time she'd smiled.

Her expression was far too awkward and fickle to be called happy, though.

Gingerly, Aurora grasped Kojou's hand.

Kojou firmly took her ice-cold hand as they began to walk outside, neither suspecting what fate awaited them...

## 5

Space seemed to rip apart as a giant beast appeared.

It was a three-headed demon dog spewing fire in every direction. At its core was a dense mass of sentient demonic energy, a summoned beast serving vampires from within their own blood—a Beast Vassal.

"Ganglot—please!"

Veldiana took the multi-headed hound, nearly three meters in length, with her as she rushed the lab's front gate. Its front paws mowed down the neatly arrayed lampposts, while its fire breath set the lawn ablaze. The actual damage was minimal, but at the very least, it *looked* like a spectacular act of vandalism.

Veldiana's objective was not to damage MAR. She only needed to draw the guards' attention until Kojou Akatsuki got Aurora out. She'd meant to create a suitable ruckus before withdrawing in good order, but—

"Aaah?!"

Veldiana's expression hardened in response to the merciless barrage all around. Little robots the shape of garbage cans rushed out of the front gate and the lab building one after another, each an autonomous security pod equipped with firearms. A barrage of large-caliber machine-gun rounds and grenades descended upon Veldiana.

Veldiana used her own Beast Vassal as a shield, unable to contain herself as she said in a tearful voice, "Th-this isn't what you told me, Mimori Akatsuki! Wasn't security supposed to be *light*...?!"

Mere machine-gun rounds were insufficient to defeat a vampire's Beast Vassal, but that didn't mean she could hide behind it forever. Soon she would

be surrounded, her avenue for escape completely cut off.

Moreover, the number of security pods was increasing every moment. She had no idea how they'd managed to run a permit past the Gigafloat Management Corporation, but it was firepower on par with a small private army.

"This is why I can't stand rich people!" Veldiana spat, rich with resentment, and slowly made her retreat. Since she had devoted her Beast Vassal to defense, she had no opportunity for a counterattack.

She glanced at the medical wing at the back side of the lab complex. It was faster than she'd planned, but she seemed to have no option except to run for it.

"Get her out, Kojou Akatsuki... You're Gajou's son, aren't you?!"

Veldiana felt like she was uttering a prayer as she approached the high wall surrounding the laboratory. She couldn't use her ability to turn to mist while keeping her Beast Vassal summoned. But it wasn't high enough that she'd have difficulty jumping over it with raw vampiric strength—

"Agh...?!"

Veldiana sustained a sudden blow that made her entire body go numb, driving her to her knees.

The laboratory wall, once white, was now covered with complex magical symbols and magic circles. It was a barrier for capturing intruders. The dazzling, golden glow was no doubt holy light meant to constrain a demon's movements.

With Veldiana unable to move, security pods rushed right at her. Her Cerberus was fully occupied blocking gunfire from the front, so she couldn't use it elsewhere.

"Ugh...! Gangloti—please, punch through!"

Veldiana clenched her teeth and summoned this new Beast Vassal. It was the second of the two Beast Vassals that served her—a twin-headed dog.

The laboratory's defensive wall sustained the huge Beast Vassal's attack and crumbled down. Security pods circled to Veldiana's left and right to pepper her

with gunfire, but before they could, she regained her physical freedom and climbed over the wall to the outside.

“As I suspected...no sign of pursuit beyond...the property...”

Veldiana panted raggedly and released her Beast Vassals. She no longer had enough demonic energy to travel long distances while turned to mist. The vampiress, not even a hundred years of age, was too young and inexperienced to be considered an Old Guard yet. Just controlling two Beast Vassals simultaneously was pushing her limits.

On top of that, she still had nicks from the bullets all over her body. They were not mortal injuries, but the bleeding was heavy. She needed to recuperate in a safe place if at all possible.

Expending her remaining physical energy, Veldiana headed to a beach away from the city. She found a place under a steel monorail bridge away from prying eyes, where she flopped down in a heap.

She wished she could at least sleep somewhere with a bed, but she was an unregistered demon. She could foresee the trouble that would come the second someone asked her for identification. Moreover, she could hardly show herself in public covered in blood.

“To think you cannot even enter a store without a demon registration bracelet... That’s what makes it a city for *daytime* people! And they call this a Demon Sanctuary...!”

Veldiana, well aware that was slander, clutched her knees as she grumbled. However, the situation felt nothing like a “worst case” to her. It was true that she’d had a horrid time, but she’d managed to achieve her objective: awakening Avrora Florestina.

“Now that the Twelfth has awakened, even the Bookmaker must acknowledge her as a candidate for Fourth Primogenitor... Liana, my sister... with this, we shall avenge our family...”

Veldiana clenched both fists, invoking the name of her dead sister as a prayer.

In the end, it had taken nearly thirty minutes to regenerate from her wounds. The pain of the wounds remained, but the bleeding had already stopped. She

had a vampire's exceptional healing power to thank for that. It didn't mean she had her lost blood or physical energy back, but at least she could walk without any problems.

"First, I will rejoin Kojou Akatsuki... I must decide on a place to rendezvous."

Suddenly, a gush of fresh blood burst out from her right leg.

By the time Veldiana realized it, she lost her balance and fell to the ground. Dumbfounded, she looked at her surroundings, not yet comprehending what had happened.

Then, fierce pain set in.

Her right leg had been raggedly torn at the hip. She'd taken a round from a large-caliber rifle.

"Ah... Guaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Veldiana screamed, pressing down on her blood-drenched right hip.

A vampire's life force did not dull pain. Veldiana writhed from the prolonged, ceaseless, unbearable agony.

From somewhere, she heard a theatrical voice that seemed to ridicule her suffering.

"Ahh... That will not do; it will not. Such a scream. Even if your family has fallen from grace, you are the daughter of a noble family of the Warlord's Empire. You must behave with grace at all times, even with a leg or two ripped off."

"Wh-why you...!"

Veldiana's cheek twitched as she looked up. Standing there and looking down at her was a supple, middle-aged man with a kaiser beard. He had deathly pale skin and small, inscrutable eyes. The man somehow seemed sly like a fox.

Standing on either side of him were creepy men, dressed in black from head to toe. Their limbs were unusually long, and their shoulders were impossibly bulky. The men wore masks patterned after animal skulls, which revealed their thick lips and huge, bizarre, uneven teeth.

“What are Nosferatu from Nelapsi doing in the Far East Demon Sanctuary...?!”

While shouting, Veldiana forgot about the pain shooting through her leg.

Nosferatu were a type of demon that dwelled in the Warlord’s Empire, a type of lesser vampire unable to summon Beast Vassals. To pureblood vampires like Veldiana, their repeated, violent acts of plunder made them objects of scorn and hatred.

Nelapsi was the name of the Nosferatu’s autonomous territory, where Veldiana’s biological father, the Duke of Caruana, had lost his life in combat with those Nosferatu.

With a triumphant expression, the man with facial hair said, “Hee-hee, does it bother you? Yes, of course I will tell you. Well, you see, we heard some trifling rumors...that the immature daughter of a foolish nobleman, who died a spineless death on the battlefield, losing not only the crown that should have been his but his lands in the process, intended to cowardly awaken a new Kaleid Blood and participate in the Blazing Banquet— Truly a farce, I say.”

“...Silence! I shall not allow a mere, filthy ghoul to demean Father!”

Veldiana howled raggedly, full of rage. Her summoned Cerberus spewed flames as it attacked the man. However, the Nosferatu on either side of him moved before the demon dog’s attack reached its target.

Although lesser, they were still formidable vampires, with reservoirs of demonic energy on par with other demons. And in return for being unable to employ Beast Vassals, Nosferatu used magical devices to further amplify their demonic power, coursing it through their own flesh and blood.

One after another, blades broke out from the flesh of their arms and shoulders and flew toward the Cerberus. Bathed in demonic energy, the blades stopped the Cerberus’s charge cold. With Veldiana exhausted, her Beast Vassal was unable to fight them off.

“Truth be told, we are grateful for what you have done, Veldiana Caruana,” the bearded man said, bending his head forward in delight. “Thanks to your reviving the Twelfth, we are able to obtain yet another God-killing weapon.”

“No... I’ll never let you do such a...”

Veldiana groaned in anguish as her fingertips thrust at the ground.

The man served by the Nosferatu meant to snatch Aurora for themselves. They'd simply been waiting for Veldiana to awaken her for them. And now that Veldiana was a loose end, they were going to eliminate her. She no longer possessed the strength to oppose them.

"Your role has come to an end. I shall express my gratitude by sending you to the same place where your parents and your older sister reside. It is the least I can do."

The man glanced at the ghoul to the right. The ghoul nodded without a word, swiveling a gun barrel embedded into his wrist toward Veldiana. And without the slightest hesitation, he opened fire.

The next moment, a sudden gust of wind slammed into the ghoul's flank.

"Nu...?!"

With the gust of wind throwing off his aim, the bullet pierced the ground right before Veldiana's eyes. The timing was too perfect to have been mere coincidence.

"Oho," the bearded man laughed, raising his eyebrows in curiosity. "That wind...? It does not seem to be sorcery, and yet..."

Then, by the time he looked back to Veldiana, she was gone.

She hadn't turned to mist to hide. It was as if she had melted into thin air, vanishing without a trace.

"...A teleportation ritual... I see. So that's how it is."

He snorted, clearly unamused.

Veldiana had not escaped by her own power. Someone had helped her. Someone specializing in teleportation magic—

"Count Zaharias...we could still track her by scent, but..." One of the Nosferatu spoke through the mask covering his face.

"Mmm," Zaharias said, making a show of considering that option as he stroked his beard. "No, let us not. She is a formidable opponent. There is no

need for us to plunge into a witch's nest for Veldiana Caruana alone."

Saying this, Zaharias turned on his heels.

"—Order the other unit to prioritize securing the Twelfth."

The next instant, the shapes of the Nosferatu dressed in black contorted as they vanished into thin air.

The time of day was near sunset. The darkness of twilight enveloping the Demon Sanctuary grew further still.

## 6

Kojou was walking down a coastal footpath, with the vampire girl wearing a school uniform in tow.

Escaping from MAR had been astoundingly simple. No one gave Kojou or Avrora a second look as they left via the hospital's back entrance, to the point that he wondered if Veldiana's diversion had been pointless.

As Avrora walked beside Kojou, he looked at the side of her face, sounding a bit dismayed as he murmured, "Looks like the coast is clear... We pulled that off better than I thought."

Walking under the evening sun in her uniform, Avrora looked like a normal girl without a trace of vampire in her. The nurse's sandals he'd picked up in the hospital and put on her bare feet fit her surprisingly well, and they even matched.

For her part, Avrora seemed calm as she surveyed her surroundings. She gazed at the abundance of buildings and the cars crossing at intersections, letting out an *ooh* of admiration.

"This shouldn't surprise you that much."

As Avrora stopped to stare, Kojou spoke as he looked back, astounded. But the vampire girl shook her head fervently. *That is not so* seemed to be the message. Next, she ran to the fence along the coast. She gazed at the surface of the sea, which reflected the rays of the setting sun, and marveled at the abundance of seagulls. She looked like an overwhelmingly curious little girl.



Kojou wanted to laugh.

“Come to think of it, she did say you were locked up underground...”

*Maybe this is the first time she's been outside in her life,* Kojou pondered. If that was the case, he could understand why she was so worked up. But...

“Hey, um, don't run off too far. Also, don't forget that you're not wearing panties.”

Seeing her scrambling up the fence, preparing to leap a long way down, Kojou urgently dragged her back. Her uniform's skirt fluttered, which made him see things he wasn't supposed to. Avrora went red to the tips of her ears.

“D-do not engage in vulgar delusions, servant!”

“Since when did I become your servant? Geez...”

Seeing Avrora's tearful eyes, Kojou glanced back with an exasperated look, sighing deeply.

That instant, he had a flashback of another strange vision: that of Avrora and a silhouette floating behind her, which resembled an enormous Siren.

“Hey, Avrora... I've met you before somewhere, haven't I?” Kojou asked, suddenly becoming serious.

“Auu...,” Avrora said, lowering her eyes with a conflicted look. Perhaps it was a rather sudden thing to ask, but...

“I think I was still a kid back then, but...in a dream, I was with Nagisa in a cave I'd never seen before, and there was a girl just like you, sleeping in this ridiculously huge block of ice.”

“...Nagisa?”

“The girl that uniform belongs to. My little sister. She's back in that hospital right now from aftereffects of that incident.” Kojou smiled wanly and added casually, “Well, Mom said I had dreams like that because the incident happened when we were heading to a ruin in a foreign country. A mix of reality and imaginatio—er?!”

The sight of tears pouring out of Avrora threw Kojou for a complete loop. He

didn't think it was just sympathy, but even so, it hadn't been enough for her to burst into tears.

"What are *you* crying for?! It wasn't that much of a sob story!"

"M-my memories are confused... Unanticipated emotional interference seems to have..." Aurora sniffed as she spoke. Apparently, even she didn't know the reason she was crying.

Kojou pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and meticulously wiped the girl's face as he said, "I really don't know what the heck you're saying... But, well, thank you."

"Y-you do not need to thank me."

The tip of Aurora's nose was red as she whispered, apparently unable to endure the embarrassment. Meanwhile, Kojou gazed at her curiously.

"Come to mention it, that Veldiana lady said you could save Nagisa. What can you actually do for her? Do you know some kind of healing spell or have some special power you can use...?"

"Er, ah..."

Aurora seemed conflicted as she bit her lower lip. *I know not*, the shake of her head seemed to say.

With a look that said, *What's that supposed to mean?* Kojou drew his face close to hers, making her retreat a step.

"But MAR had a reason for nabbing you, didn't it?"

"M-my memories continue to be confused... I only just awakened from the seal of ice...", the vampire girl earnestly explained in a straight-laced tone.

"Hmm." Kojou brought a hand to his mouth. "So you don't remember, either."

"R-regrettably..."

"Nah, don't worry about it. I figured it was something like that anyway. I had a bad feeling the second I heard my idiot father was involved."

Kojou seemed to have regained his senses. He turned his gaze upward and

then looked back at Avrora. He'd managed to forget due to the stress, but she was a fugitive from an MAR lab. It was no doubt best to hide her in a safe area for the time being.

Having said that, he couldn't think of a convenient place to hide a vampire girl without any form of identification.

"...Geez, Vel sure dances to her own tune, pushing an unregistered vamp onto me. It'd be way easier takin' care of a puppy."

Now that the gravity of the situation struck him, Kojou started seriously worrying. Either way, it'd be nighttime soon. He couldn't just walk around with her in circles. But bringing her to Kojou's apartment presented problems of its own. After all, Kojou's own mother was an MAR chief of research. Even if she didn't come home very often, it'd be a heap of trouble if she came face-to-face with Avrora. Getting her out of MAR would be all for nothing.

"Can't be helped... And it's not like I can have you pantyless forever. Let's go to my place for now and get you changed. We'll think about what to do later after Vel catches up—"

Kojou decided that the solution was to kick the can down the road and began walking again. But he didn't have any sense Avrora was with him.

He suddenly saw Avrora leaning against the guardrail, crouching limply.

"Hey, Avrora...? What's wrong? Are you in pain?!"

Kojou got nervous when he recalled that she'd been in isolation under MAR. He ought to have considered the possibility that she hadn't been captured for research purposes but rather because she was too sick and frail to be out and about. However, what made Kojou doubt that was how surprisingly well Avrora looked.

She held a hand to her stomach, looking like the most pathetic girl in the whole, wide world as she complained:

"I am s-stricken by p-pangs of hunger..."

"...Ah?"

Kojou felt his strength leak out from every pore. Avrora simply nodded in

silence.

“So...the gist is, you’re, ah, too hungry to move?”

“I-it is as you say.”

“Oh, right, you said you’d just woken up. So like normal folks, vampires get hungry when they don’t eat regularly, huh...”

Kojou grimaced, surveying the surrounding landscape all the while. Island South was a corporate and academic research district with no eatery in sight that would be accessible to a middle school student. Despite that, he spotted a familiar logo on a sign along the coastal walkway and picked the vampire girl up in his arms.

“Got it. Hang on for a bit, Avrora.”

“Uu...”

Frightened, Avrora clung to him as they crossed the nearest intersection. His destination was the ice cream stand with glass windows: Lulu’s, the place his little sister liked so much.

Avrora, uneasy at first, went “Ooh” as she looked at the colorful showcase of ice cream flavors, her nostrils twitching and her interest piqued.

The Lulu’s sales rep was shocked by Avrora’s inhuman beauty, but he didn’t suspect anything further and treated them like normal customers. Since Avrora was so indecisive, Kojou picked “Today’s Special” and left the stand with her.

“...Nn!”

Licking the ice cream, Avrora’s enormous blue eyes bulged so wide, they almost fell right out. Apparently, the taste was not what she had been expecting.

“Tastes good?” Kojou asked, holding back a smile as he watched Avrora’s eyes sparkle.

Avrora made several small nods as she resembled a little puppy wagging its tail.

“L-like a fruit of Eden!”

“That much...?!”

*I wouldn't go that far*, Kojou couldn't help musing to himself, but he didn't think poorly of such outpourings of joy, even if it was over mere ice cream. Kojou watched Aurora devour the treat with great vigor. *Here*, he motioned, offering her his own portion.

“If you want, you can have mine, too. It's not good to overeat, though.”

“I-indeed... P-praiseworthy of you.”

With bashful reserve, Aurora reached out and took the ice cream cone.

Kojou indulged in absentminded thoughts as he watched the girl lick the edges of her lips all over.

Veldiana had called this vampire girl the twelfth Kaleid Blood. Kojou knew that name. The Fourth Primogenitor. The World's Mightiest Vampire. The monster without any blood brethren, beyond all worldly doctrines.

Even so, he just couldn't see the girl before his eyes as a monster. In fact, he barely managed to interpret her as anything but a normal middle schooler. *What's wrong with me?* he thought as he listlessly rested his chin on his palm.

“Ah...”

Kojou was still in that position when he sensed Aurora gasping right beside him.

Her reaction caused him to notice the unfamiliar men that had surrounded them at some point—men in creepy black outfits, wearing animal-skull masks.

One look was enough to understand that they weren't gainfully employed humans. Either they were cosplayers with deviant tastes or criminals with a reason to conceal their faces.

“...What's with you people?”

Kojou shielded Aurora as he got to his feet. As he did, his temple was struck with a blow from the side.

Kojou flew several meters, slamming into a concrete bank. He'd only just realized a man in black had punched him when he was lying on the ground.

There was no sign of restraint or mercy. It had been a killing blow, launched without warning.

“Kojou—!”

Avrora let out a loud cry. She rushed toward Kojou when a different man in black clothes caught her from behind.

There were three men total. The man who was apparently in charge spoke quietly, almost like he was talking to himself. It seemed that he had a transmitter implanted inside his own throat.

“16:38 hours, forty-four seconds— Contact with Dodekatos. Single companion. Companion neutralized, Dodekatos secured.”

The scrutinizing eyes beneath the mask gazed coldly at Avrora.

Avrora desperately tried to squirm away, but even her vampiric physical strength could not shake off the man’s arms. No doubt the men in the black outfits weren’t normal humans.

“16:39 hours, fifteen seconds— Target secured. Proceeding to withdraw.”

Judging that Avrora was not capable of resistance, the leader of the men gave instructions to his subordinates. A station wagon with tinted glass windows had just arrived.

Kojou spat out a mix of blood and saliva as he stood back up.

“...It doesn’t look like you guys are MAR guards, huh...”

The man in the black outfit who’d punched Kojou turned his head, looking back at him in surprise. He seemed to be wondering why Kojou was still alive after being sent flying so spectacularly.

“16:39 hours, fifty-seven seconds— Amendment. Resistance by companion confirmed. Proceeding to repeat neutraliza—”



The leader continued his report with a calm voice. However, Kojou broke into a ferocious run before he'd finished his transmission. Then, he launched a haymaker punch at the man who'd grabbed Aurora.

The opponent's reaction to Kojou's unexpected action was a moment too late.

The masked man's face whipped to the side. It wasn't spectacular enough to send his body flying, but the impact must have been transferred straight to his brain.

"Let her go, you jerk in a perv mask!"

Kojou snatched Aurora from the reeling man's grasp.

Upon seeing this, the attitude of the attackers in black outfits changed. No doubt they'd never imagined that the boy, no more than a normal human, could put up that much of a fight.

Kojou had only a vague grasp of where the power welling within him had originated. He was spurred by a simple sense of duty: He *had* to protect Aurora.

The man in charge quietly stated, "16:40 hours, twenty-two seconds—Target's threat level amended to Class C. Use of Option Bravo authorized."

The next instant, their flesh ripped apart as numerous embedded blades emerged.

Kojou and Aurora gaped at the repulsive spectacle. Even in a Demon Sanctuary, it was rare to come across demons with dangerous internal modifications to that extent. The only people who'd need those kinds of implants were soldiers engaging in combat on a daily basis or criminals carrying out assassinations.

"Let's run for it, Aurora."

"Y-yes."

Kojou led Aurora by the hand as they ran. They had no reason to engage in a straight-up fight with wacko demons like these.

Yet, the leader of the black-outfitted men leaped over their heads with



monstrous strength, cutting off their avenue of escape. The remaining two pursued at Kojou and Avrora's backs.

"16:41 hours, three seconds— Target's escape prevented. Applying Plan Delta."

One of the men swung up with a blade embedded in his right arm. The blade was a double-edged knife almost thirty centimeters long. The magic symbols carved into the blade glowed red as it spewed demonic flame.

"What the hell's with these guys...?!"

Kojou clenched his sweat-drenched fist. Their assailants were clearly after Avrora. Furthermore, they were trying to eliminate him for standing in their way.

If he could sustain an attack from that thick knife, there was no way he'd walk away from it. But there was nowhere to run. It was do or die.

The man in black didn't say a word as he swung down, right at Kojou's face. But—

"Guooooooooa!"

With an anguished voice, it was the attacker who staggered back.

A dull *zdan*, like the sound of punching something metal, echoed all around. A transparent round, fired from the front, had scored a solid hit on the knife-wielder.

Together with the bone-breaking blow, the transparent bullet bounced off, transforming into a sheet of water. His entire body bathed in those droplets, the man screamed again.

Then, from somewhere else, they heard a jubilant male voice that somehow sounded sarcastic and unserious:

"Ha-ha... Now that's quite a sight!"

The speaker was a tall Japanese man with an unkempt beard. He was wearing a color-matched leather trench coat and a fedora. He gave off the air of a member of the mafia or a private detective from times long past.

He was carrying a bizarre pistol that resembled a fire extinguisher.

Water guns that used air pressure to fire high-pressure liquid rounds—though originally designed for putting out fires, the powerful blunt force it generated gave it riot-control applications among military and police forces around the globe. The man used a miniaturized version, apparently modified for bullet cartridges with an eye toward portability.

“It’s an impulse water gun with Lourdes holy water. Packs a punch, doesn’t it?”

The man laughed as he gazed at the anguished man in black. The bullets used by the water gun were specially made with holy water from the Western European Church. They had no effect on the human body but acted like powerful acid to certain types of demons.

“16:42 hours, zero seconds— Irregularity has occurred. Sustained surprise attack from unknown combatant. Commencing intercept.”

The leader of the black-outfitted men reacted with extreme calm to the appearance of a new enemy. However, the Japanese man had reloaded his water gun before they began their counterattack, easily bringing down the other subordinate in black with another shot.

If a normal bullet was a pinpoint attack, the water gun’s holy water bullets were more like shotgun blasts. Even with a demon’s reaction speed, they were not easy to completely evade.

“16:42 hours, twenty-six seconds— Deduction: Unknown is ‘Death Returner.’ Threat level B-plus—executing Plan Myu. Withdrawing.”

It seemed that the assailants’ leader had finally abandoned the operation. He fled, taking his subordinates with him as they groaned in agony. The man in the fedora shook his head as if admiring how they’d retreated in good order.

“Hey now, finished already? You guys are no fun... I wanted to at least take one of ya prisoner!”

The man wore a lackadaisical expression as he watched his enemies’ backs before turning his head and looking at Kojou and Avrora, rooted in place. Kojou looked somewhat astonished; for her part, Avrora hid behind Kojou’s back.

The man smiled wryly as he glanced over them in apparent satisfaction.

“Heya, kid. Good job protecting Avrora. Didn’t know you had the guts, Kojou. And if I’d had my way, they wouldn’t have had any guts, either.”

The man suddenly laughed at his own bad pun as only a father would. Avrora blinked with a mystified look; maybe she had no idea what he’d just said.

And for his part, Kojou glared maliciously at the man, speaking in a low growl.

“—What the hell are *you* doing here, Dad?!”

Gajou Akatsuki, archaeologist, simply rested his water gun on his shoulder, smiling and enjoying himself.

## Intermission i

“—The Prison Barrier is Natsuki’s dream world?”

Asagi Aiba’s voice echoed throughout the stone-walled castle dungeon.

Still tied to the metal pipe chair, she surveyed her surroundings like she was trying to ascertain if it was real.

“Then, this is a virtual space created with magic? Now that I think about it, I do feel like it reflects Natsuki’s hobbies somehow...”

Perhaps Asagi didn’t entirely pick up on all the surrounding details as she made a cute hum of admiration.

For some reason, Asagi’s simplistic reaction made Kojou feel a bit lonely and left behind.

“You sure accepted that fast. I’m still not accepting it all that well...,” he said.

“That so? I mean, stories of being locked in another world by evil spirits and demons aren’t all that rare, are they? It’s like the genie in the lamp in *The Arabian Nights*. If anyone can relate to diving into a virtual world, it’s us hackers.”

“So that’s why,” he noted, accepting Asagi’s fairly straightforward explanation.

Even if the underlying principles differed, the latest information technology and Natsuki Minamiya’s high level apparently shared certain things in common.

With a tone of dissatisfaction, Asagi asked Yukina, who stood right beside them:

“So setting that aside, why am I tied up? Why not just Kojou?”

“I apologize. There is a defensive barrier set up all around you, so it would be dangerous for you to move.”

“You said something about it being safe even if Kojou’s demonic energy goes berserk... So that’s bad?”

“Yes. Quite.”

Asagi stared at Yukina’s serious expression and slumped her shoulders without a word. She may have been disappointed, but she seemed to trust Yukina for now.

And the next moment, the air shuddered like a water ripple as a new silhouette emerged without a sound.

“Mm-hmm. The fact you’re a sharp pupil is very helpful, Aiba. Little time is lost explaining,” said a small woman with long, black hair, a lacy parasol open in her right hand. The contours of both her face and body were very striking; from a distance she could be mistaken for a doll. However, as if to defy her youthful appearance, she wore an elegant red-and-black dress, and a strange charisma hovered around her. She was Natsuki Minamiya—a federal Attack Mage assigned to law enforcement, an English teacher at Saikai Private Academy High School and, according to her, twenty-six years old.

Surprised by the sudden appearance of her homeroom teacher, Asagi unwittingly yelped in a shrill voice, “Natsuki...?!”

“I am not *Natsuki* to you.”

“Ow!” Asagi cried out, taken aback by a rough slap to her forehead.

Then Natsuki walked in a leisurely curve until she stood in front of Kojou. Natsuki gave off an impression that felt a little different from what Kojou and Asagi were accustomed to, possibly due to their presence in the Prison Barrier. There was no change in her physique, but if he had to put his finger on it, her expression seemed fuller and younger at the moment. That was probably closer to her “true” appearance.

“Err... Don’t tell me you plan to get my memory back, Natsuki?” Kojou asked, gazing at the younger-looking Natsuki.

“I told you, don’t call me by my first name.”

As she spoke, she suddenly whacked him with the parasol in her hand. Kojou, restrained by chains, could not escape the rather painful blow. Even so, he continued heedlessly, “It feels like no good’ll come from asking this, but how the heck do you plan on doing that, anyway?”

As he posed the question, Natsuki remained silent as she approached the torture devices lined up against the stone wall. After giving them a once-over, she reached for a metal hammer resembling a meat tenderizer and said, “It’s so nice to have a patient who won’t die even if you kill him. I don’t need to worry about holding back.”

“Physical attacks?! That’s awfully primitive, isn’t it?!”

The chains binding Kojou’s entire body creaked as he shouted. He thought that giving a patient with amnesia a strong blow to the head was medically unsound, the sort of thing kids should *not* try at home.

“It’s just a little adult humor. Don’t take it so seriously,” Natsuki said without amusement, releasing the mallet. Then, as if pitying Kojou, she narrowed her eyes and made a beautiful smile. “Though, it might be easier on you if I could remind you with only a smack to the head.”

“Whaddaya mean by that?! You’re freaking me out!!” he exclaimed. He scowled and added, “It doesn’t sound like a joke, coming from you.”

That was when Kojou noticed the old book Natsuki was carrying under her left arm.

“—That book?!”

“Oho, you remember it?”

The corners of Natsuki’s lips curled up in satisfaction.

“That’s the one Yuuma’s mom had...from when you were turned back into a little kid.”

“Yes. Grimoire No. 014...for controlling an individual’s personal history.”

A personal history encompassed someone’s accumulated time from birth to the present; in other words, it magically stored an individual’s life. Grimoire No. 014 could steal other people’s personal history—their memories, growth, and changes. The vile tome could return a talented adult to the state of a powerless child, as well as steal another person’s knowledge and experiences. Even in LCO, a criminal organization accumulating grimoires from the world over, it was a dangerous book only the leader of the organization was permitted to bear.

“Properly speaking, it is a grimoire for wholesale robbery of the ‘time’ another person has passed, like Aya Tokoyogi did, but I cannot expect it to work to the same extent against a vampire primogenitor. I believe it can at least recreate the time you experienced in the past and allow others to share it with you.”

Natsuki offered her conclusion without the slightest hesitation. Kojou’s unease preceded his understanding of exactly what she was saying.

“Others...sharing the time I spent...?”

“Grimoires like this tend to work poorly on vampires given their high magical resistance, but that’s why you’re in the Prison Barrier. We are inside my dream world, after all; it should serve us fairly well. Worst case, I’ll have the transfer student help. If she stabs you with that Schneewaltzer, your power to resist shall surely diminish.”

“I suppose you are right.” Yukina, gripping the silver spear, agreed without the slightest hesitation. Her spear, dubbed Snowdrift Wolf, was a primogenitor-killing weapon that nullified demonic energy.

“Wait a darn minute!” screamed Kojou without restraint. “Never mind power to resist, that thing’ll kill me! Don’t just agree with her like that, Himeragi!”

When Kojou had been impaled by that spear before, he’d experienced not only enough pain to kill a man, but he’d endured a terrible wound that even vampiric healing ability could not overcome. Just remembering it made him shudder.

Asagi ignored Kojou’s fear and asked, “What would experiencing the same time as him mean?”

“It means exactly what it sounds like. Everyone here will experience the occasions Kojou Akatsuki did. You could say it’s close to watching a person’s memories. The difference is, the actual events shall be faithfully reproduced regardless of his own memories.”

“I see... So even if the memory vanished, the ‘experience’ still stays with you. It’s like transferring unreadable data to a different disk so you can recover it.”

Asagi readily accepted Natsuki’s explanation.

Kojou's lips twisted in irritation as he looked up at her. "Maybe this is a selfish thing to say, but what about my privacy here?"

Natsuki appeared mystified. "...You have such a thing?" she mused aloud.

"Hey!" he exclaimed, his voice getting ragged. "Oh yes, I do! Everyone's got one or two things they don't want people to know!"

Asagi chimed in, "What, you mean like the *Big Breasts Special Edition* pin-up magazine you hid in your room in middle school?"

"How the hell do you know about that?!"

Kojou, disturbed at the sudden revelation of his embarrassing past, turned his gaze toward Asagi in horror.

"Nagisa found them when she was cleaning your room and was shocked, so she came to me and Motoki to talk about it. Well, in the end, it turned out that Motoki had lent it to you in the first place..."

"Aaaaaaaaaaggghhh..."

Asagi's explanation hit Kojou like a sucker punch, making him hunch in dismay despite the chains. The fact that even his little sister knew his secret pushed him deeper into despair.

*"Big Breasts Special Edition?"*

*"Big Breasts Special Edition... Is that so..."*

Natsuki and Yukina stared at Kojou, and in a tone even colder than normal, they said:

"You're the worst."

"You really are the worst."

"Oh, shaddup! A middle school boy is into lots of stuff!" Kojou lamented in a mixture of defiance and desperation.

Asagi sighed, truly exasperated. "'Lots of stuff,' meaning you're hiding more?"

"No! That's not what I meant!"

Yukina murmured in apparent resignation, "Well...I knew from the start that



you're an indecent person, senpai."

Kojou looked hurt. "Hey, there's no connection between those two things!"

Natsuki giggled and grinned as she twirled her parasol, ridiculing Kojou.

"Do not be concerned. Your private life does not hold my interest. I shall revive only the parts of your memory that are missing: in other words, those related to the previous Fourth Primogenitor—Aurora Florestina."

"If that's the case, say so from the start, dammit." He glared at Natsuki and grumbled, "Didn't need to embarrass me like that."

Natsuki gazed at Kojou, her eyes unemotional as she stated, "This will probably be a difficult experience for everyone."

"Yeah, I know that."

Kojou quietly nodded. The chains wrapped around his body somehow seemed heavier.

"...I already know that."



CHAPTER TWO  
AVRORA, THE TWELFTH

## CHAPTER TWO

### AVRORA, THE TWELFTH

#### *1*

It was the eighteenth on the lunar calendar, the eve of the nineteenth day...

A small silhouette stood atop a conning tower, looking down as the sun set on the Demon Sanctuary.

It was a young man, perhaps twelve or thirteen. He wore a loose *kandura*, an ankle-length, long-sleeved garment akin to a robe, with his entire body adorned with ornate gold jewelry. He had black hair and brown skin, and his golden eyes seemed to penetrate the darkness. His face was still a little childish, but his overall appearance brimmed with overwhelming solemnity, reminiscent of a young lion.

A golden mist suddenly rose up behind the boy.

The cloud visibly coalesced into the form of a single man: a young, blond, blue-eyed vampire aristocrat wearing a stark white coat.

“—The Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island. A fine view, is it not?”

Addressed by the young aristocrat, the boy continued gazing at the nighttime landscape. He smirked in obvious scorn.

“This land is but a twisted thing, born from sorcery and scrap metal. A pile of trash.”

“However, it is a pile of trash with some extraordinary tricks. That is what makes humans so interesting.”

“I see... So you have come, Dimitrie Vattler...”

The boy looked back at the sly, irritating smile on the young aristocrat’s face, narrowing his own golden eyes ferociously.

Vattler placed his hand to the breast of his coat and formally bowed.

“I am honored that you remember me, Prince Iblisveil Aziz. To be honest, I found it somewhat unexpected that a direct descendant of the Second Primogenitor such as yourself would come in person to a Demon Sanctuary in the Far East.”

“It’s a spectacle seventy years in the making. I must make a suitable effort—how boorish it would be to leave everything to underlings and have unfamiliar faces make the decisions, would it not?”

Iblisveil made his statement as sharp fangs protruded from his lips.

A side-by-side comparison with the tall Vattler made him look particularly young. Yet, the inhuman aura hovering around his diminutive physique was in no way inferior to Vattler’s.

“I applaud your wisdom, Your Highness.”

The young aristocrat replied with respect. For his part, Iblisveil clicked his tongue as he watched Vattler in obvious dissatisfaction.

“I’m thinking the same thing of you, Vattler. This isn’t supposed to be a battlefield. What, have you come to consume the Fourth Primogenitor? Or am I on the menu instead?”

“Surely you jest. This time, I am a mere referee—the girls’ conductor, if you will.”

“Girls...?”

Iblisveil suspiciously raised an eyebrow and glared at Vattler.

“Vattler, don’t tell me you’re going to let the Numbered roam freely?!”

“It’s been so long since we had our last banquet. ’Twere it not enjoyable, it would be such a waste.”

Vattler’s clear, blue eyes narrowed as he laughed.

The black-haired prince shook his head, unable to believe the foolishness he was witnessing.

“What are you trying to do, strap a bomb to a wild beast and send it running

into a warehouse full of powder kegs? I cannot believe I'm hearing this."

"...But it has made this banquet a far more vibrant one."

Upon suddenly hearing a new voice, both men looked back.

With the afterglow of the sky in the background, a sparsely dressed girl appeared from thin air with a flutter of her light green hair. Her eyes were like deep pools of jade. She possessed a strong, lovely beauty, reminiscent of a wild leopard.

Her cute snaggle tooth poked out as she smiled at Vattler fondly.

"That's the Lost Warlord for you—what a witty representative to send."

"What...?! The Chaos Bride...!" Iblisveil exclaimed in a muffled voice. Naturally, even he could not conceal his discomfort toward the oppressive demonic power emanating from the green-haired girl.

The girl was the Chaos Bride—the Third Primogenitor, ruler of the Chaos Zone, the Dominion of Central America.

"It somewhat grates on me that Grandfather was likely well aware of this... To think that the Third Primogenitor would come in person," Iblisveil said.

Vattler was equally surprised. He fell to one knee and deeply bowed his head as his lips broke into a smile of delight at this chance meeting with a powerful foe.

"I do not like being addressed by that name. You may call me Giada."

A bold smile came over the Chaos Bride, one of the oldest and mightiest of vampires, as she spoke.

Then, her gaze shifted, glaring at a fourth figure standing at a corner of the tower.

"That goes for you as well, Paper Noise."

"—Understood. It shall be so henceforth, Giada Kukulkin."

A Japanese girl dressed in a school uniform responded to the Chaos Bride. Her hair was tied in a triple braid, and she wore unfashionable glasses. She was a plain girl, carrying a book under one arm. However, all by herself, she faced one

of the three most powerful vampires with ease. Her eyes showed no hint of fear, nor did she give off any suggestion of tension.

Iblisveil stared at the girl, unmoved as he snorted. “Hmph. One of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency in this era. Young.”

Her expression unmoved, the girl acknowledged Iblisveil with nothing but a flick of her eyes.

“—Your Highness Aziz, please be advised for future reference: I am Koyomi Shizuka. I am grateful that the Third Primogenitor, the Duke of Ardeal, and yourself, have graced me with your time this evening.”

Koyomi stepped toward the vampires. Accordingly, all eyes fell on her, making her the center of attention.

“Now, then...,” Giada murmured in amusement. She surveyed those assembled at the conning tower. “That leaves Zaharias of Nelapsi?”

Upon hearing this, the prince of the Fallen Dynasty’s youthful, symmetrical face twisted into a scowl as he spat out:

“And so I hear his accursed name. A mere arms merchant with his hands on an Autonomous Region fancies himself a lord?”

Koyomi slightly lowered her eyes and shook her head.

“Balthazar Zaharias, Chairman of the Provisional Autonomous Government of Nelapsi, shall not be attending. He stated that he shall comply with your decision concerning the matter for this evening.”

Iblisveil looked angry as he murmured to himself, “A wise decision. If he showed his face before me without reserve, I would surely rip his head from his shoulders. Damnable upstart.” Then he glared at Koyomi, retaining his sour expression. “Let me ask you, Lion King Agency: Why have you called us here? Depending upon your reply, I might have your blood as compensation, Bookmaker or no.”

“There is a single matter for me to report to you all,” Koyomi replied, unperturbed by the prince’s threatening words. “...Dodekatos...has awakened.”

“What?!” Iblisveil exclaimed, his eyes narrowing in surprise. The very air

shuddered.

Giada laughed in a beautiful voice, as refined as if one was playing a harp.

“Really... The twelfth Kaleid Blood that was sealed away— Avrora Florestina, yes? How amusing.”

“...Avrora? They went out of their way to give Dodekatos a name?” Iblisveil murmured, shocked by the Third Primogenitor’s words.

*Do they give names to chickens destined for the dinner table, too?* his surprised expression proclaimed.

“Something done on a foolish whim,” he muttered, shaking his head with an exasperated sigh.

Vattler was the last to open his mouth.

“...So MAR removed the seal? That is somewhat unexpected,” he said quietly.

Magna Ataraxia Research was in possession of Dodekatos, unearthed three years prior. From the point of view of a for-profit corporation such as MAR, Dodekatos had no value beyond that of a simple test subject. They ought not to have had any interest in removing her seal.

“The one who awoke Dodekatos is Veldiana Caruana, daughter of the late Duke Caruana,” Koyomi explained. “She illegally entered MAR and employed the Key to the coffin—”

“Is that so?” Vattler said, the corners of his lips curling up in amusement.

“Illegally entered, you say... I see. Let us leave it at that, then.”

The young aristocrat nodded a little with a meaningful smile. Koyomi made no reply.

In a breezy manner, Giada pointed out, “At any rate, with this, all twelve Kaleid Bloods have been assembled.”

Iblisveil rose an objection.

“But the House of Caruana has no territory to call its own, with none other than Zaharias to thank for that.”

“Yes. Accordingly, she has no qualifications to become Elector.”

“Then who shall serve in her stead, Lion King Agency?” With a glare, Iblisveil threw the question at Koyomi as if to test her.

Unfazed, the glasses-wearing girl continued.

“Dodekatos shall participate in the banquet. However, we do not recognize Veldiana Caruana as the Elector. We shall be the ones to provide the venue.”

Iblisveil sneered ferociously.

“A mere island nation in the Far East would compete with our Dominion as an equal? Not a bad answer at all, but may I take this to mean that your nation’s government shall prepare a suitable stake?”

“Of course. After all, one cannot have a wager without stakes.”

As Iblisveil goaded her with his eyes, Koyomi met his stare and replied.

“Then I ask you, what will you wager?” he said. “Do not forget, even that filthy arms dealer is wagering the fate of his own nation on this, as are we. If you can provide something comparable, then all’s fine and well.”

Iblisveil’s eyes glowed crimson as he laughed. It would not have been surprising for a normal person to lose his or her mind just from being exposed to such awesome dread. But Koyomi did not show any emotion whatsoever; she merely opened her right hand wide.

“We wager this island.”

Standing behind her was the nighttime landscape of the huge artificial isle. The Demon Sanctuary known as Itogami Island—

“This land, and the lives of the five hundred and sixty thousand people living upon it.”

## 2

Kojou’s father, Gajou Akatsuki, was an archaeologist. However, he was far from the stereotype of an intellectual shut in his office, spending his time in contemplation. Rather, he wandered war zones across the globe, snatching artifacts under the confusion of combat, a cross between a field worker and a looter.



Given the nature of his work, Gajou was overseas nearly year-round, returning to Japan only once in a blue moon. Kojou could count on his fingers the number of proper conversations that he and Nagisa had held with their father since moving to Itogami Island.

Such was the man who led Kojou and Aurora to a small harbor located on Island East, a marina for mooring small residential boats. There were some fifty boats and yachts docked there, lined up like barns for cattle. Gajou approached one of the boats and climbed aboard.

“Don’t be so shy, brat. Hop on.”

“I’m not really being shy, here... Just, ah, Dad, what’s this boat?” Kojou asked as he gazed at the unfamiliar white pleasure boat.

It was a small cruiser about fourteen to fifteen meters long. THE LIANA was written on the side of the hull. There was rust all over it, as if the vessel had undergone hard times at sea, yet it seemed to be quite an expensive boat. At the very least, it wasn’t the sort of thing a cash-poor archaeologist should have.

But Gajou pranced proudly around the boat’s deck and said, “She’s really something, isn’t she? I won a huge poker bet with this friend of mine in Macao and managed to get this baby on the cheap.”

“Poker bet...? What the hell were you up to?” Kojou exhaled dramatically to show his annoyance. “Well, you sure don’t come home much. What, you’ve been living on this boat the whole time?”

“Lots of people live on yachts moored at harbors in Magallanica. Lot of high-status, rich retired guys.”

Gajou brought bread, bacon, corn beef, chicken, and cold beer into the cabin as he spoke. Apparently, he had a kitchen and a refrigerator on the boat to accommodate one aspect of daily living.

“You ain’t rich or retired, though.”

“True, but it’s a hell of a lot more convenient than asking someone to rent me an apartment here. Anyway, eat. You’ve gotta be starving, right?”

Gajou set the food on a table on the aft deck. Kojou scratched his head in

exasperation before leading Avrora by the hand onto the boat, and—looking dismayed—he sat facing Gajou. Avrora meekly sat beside him.

Gajou chuckled in delight as he watched her cuddled up against Kojou, sliding a handmade sandwich before her. It had lettuce, tomato, and thick, meaty ham between slices of French bread—simple, but it looked mouth-wateringly tasty.

“...Y-you offer tribute to me, child of Man...!”

Avrora’s empty stomach pleaded as she accepted the sandwich, eyes sparkling. She looked at Kojou. *May I eat it?* was the question on her face. Kojou told her to eat the whole thing and handed the sandwich to her. Then he looked straight at his father.

“So explain, dammit...”

“Oh, this, you mean?” Gajou smiled proudly as he lifted up the bottle he was swigging. “This is surface-fermented beer from a monastery in Australia. They don’t make much, and it’s rarely on the market, so half the world thinks it’s a myth. And it’s deeelicious!”

“I wasn’t talking about the beer!” Kojou was spontaneously seized by the urge to smack his father around. “Where the hell have you been all this time? You’ve barely been in touch for three years!”

Gajou ignored his son’s yelling with an innocent look. “You met Veldiana, right?” he asked nonchalantly.

“Yeah,” said Kojou, glaring at his father with a pointed look in his eyes. “Who is she, anyway? And what’s her relation to you?”

“Oh, does it bother you? It really bothers you, doesn’t it?”

For some reason, Gajou looked carefree as he gazed at his son’s face. Put bluntly, Kojou found it obnoxious.

“Well, don’t worry, it’s not like I’m keeping a harem of lovers on a leash. Besides, I only go for girls with tits that bounce.”

“I wasn’t asking about your taste in women!” Kojou shouted with a curl of his lips. “And even if it’s a lie, you’re supposed to *say* you’re faithful to your wife, dammit!”

Gajou chuckled before pouring his beer down the hatch.

“Veldiana’s the little sister of an old friend of mine. Three years ago, she died protecting you, Nagisa, and the little princess there.”

Kojou’s voice lowered.

“...You’re saying it was during the incident where Nagisa and I almost died?”

Three years before must have meant the terrorist train bombing was why Nagisa had been hospitalized. However, Kojou had no firm memory of the incident. Besides, Aurora shouldn’t have had anything to do with it.

Gajou gazed pityingly at his confused son.

“You didn’t *almost* die. You died, very literally. And you came back to life—as the Blood Servant of the Fourth Primogenitor. That’s why you can’t remember what happened just before and after.”

Gajou pulled an old scrapbook out from somewhere and tossed it in front of Kojou. **FOURTH GOZO RUINS JOINT EXAMINATION TEAM** was written in marker atop the faded cover page.

The large, swollen scrapbook was stocked with a ton of photographs, showing scenes of faded, sun-scorched rock faces, ancient stonework ruins, and a block of ice—a frigid coffin protected by frost and countless icicles.

“This photo...”

“You must remember it. It’s the Fairy’s Coffin dug up on Gozo Island, the world’s oldest Demon Sanctuary. That’s where you were attacked by terrorists. That stuff about being caught in the Roman Autonomous Region terror bombing was just a cover-up. There would’ve been a lot of trouble if they hadn’t concealed the truth.”

There, Gajou let his words trail off as he sighed quietly and deeply. Even as he poked fun at the incident, he no doubt felt some responsibility for involving Kojou.

For his part, Kojou was dumbfounded as he listened to his father’s explanation. He’d suddenly been told he had died once and come back to life. None of that seemed real.

Yet, Kojou couldn't laugh this off like Gajou's usual antics, because he *did* remember seeing it. Kojou knew the scenes in the photographs contained in the scrapbook. He'd seen them in his dreams many times over in the intervening three years.

"I'm...the Fourth Primogenitor's...Blood Servant.....?"

"It's a crazy story, I tell you. The Fourth Primogenitor is the World's Mightiest Vampire and has no blood brethren. That she created a servant is surprising in itself, let alone that it was *you*. Of course it's hard to believe. I was there at the ruin, and I can hardly believe it myself," Gajou continued.

Kojou was beside himself as he touched his hand to his temple.

A Blood Servant was a pseudo-vampire created by a vampire master. Acceptance of part of the vampire's own body changed one from a human into a vampire's Blood Servant, granted eternal life to live together with the vampire, be it as a faithful subordinate or a personal companion. It was the closest a "human being" could come to being a demon—

"That smack you got earlier healed already, didn't it?" Gajou pointed out.

There was no wound on Kojou's flank. The man in black had harmed him about an hour before. It couldn't have been a minor injury, yet there remained not even a faint trace.

It was the kind of super-healing ability granted to vampires. It was unnatural for him to have shrugged off the damage and stood up to begin with.

"But this never happened to me before... This never happened when I got hurt in basketball club...!"

"Yeah, that's because Avrora was still sealed. I figure that once the princess woke up, she started supplying you with demonic energy again."

Gajou had shredded his son's weak rebuttal with ease.

"You might be the Fourth Primogenitor's Blood Servant, but you're still just a human who heals a little faster when you get hurt. If you knew how to use magic it'd be a different story, but hey. Don't get cocky, brat."

"I'm not getting cocky at all, geez..."

Kojou tried to repress the anger in his voice. Gajou seemed amazed as he looked back at his son.

“What, you don’t like being a vampire’s Blood Servant? You can still go back to being human, you know.”

“That so?”

“It’s simple. Kill the princess over there.”

“Wha...?!”

His father’s disturbing suggestion made Kojou’s face freeze. Aurora shuddered as if frightened out of her wits.

Gajou gazed at their reactions in apparent amusement.

“Naturally, if the master vampire dies, the Blood Servant isn’t qualified to be their vassal anymore. A servant who’s lived for hundreds of years might turn to ash on the spot, but that’s not the case for you yet. There are basically no downsides. So how about it?”

“‘How about it’?! There’s no way I can kill her!”

Kojou violently pounded the table. Then he glared at Aurora, who wore a worried expression.

“And have a little more faith in me, sheesh. I’m the one who risked my life to save you. I’ve got no reason to hate you. Never mind that, I should be thanking you for saving my life, shouldn’t I?”

“Th-the truth is lost to oblivion...,” she replied, meekly averting her eyes.

“Ah,” Kojou said as he scowled. “Right. You did mention you lost your memory.”

“R-regrettably...”

Aurora nodded timidly. Having lost her memory, even if you told her she was the savior of your life, it was hard for her to appreciate that.

One was a Blood Servant for whom being brought back to life didn’t feel real; the other was a vampire who’d lost her memory of bringing him back to life. In one sense, they were a master and servant truly suited for each other.

*Come to think about it*, mused Kojou, shaking his head before turning to his father. “Vel said that she could save Nagisa, but—”

When Kojou pointed at Avrora, her eyes widened as if she was startled. To begin with, the vampiress’s words were what had motivated Kojou to protect Avrora. Veldiana had said that only Avrora could save Nagisa Akatsuki’s life.

“You’re not gonna tell me something stupid, like have her die once to bring her back to life, too?”

Kojou shot Gajou a doubting look. Bringing a debilitated Nagisa back to life as a vampire’s Blood Servant—a sane father would never think of such a solution, but he couldn’t put it past Gajou.

However, Gajou furrowed his brows, making his displeasure plain.

“Oh? Don’t be stupid. You’re another story, but I’m not gonna let Nagisa die.”

“But it’s okay if I do?!”

“In the first place, going out of my way to kill Nagisa would be meaningless. The cause of her debilitation is her own spiritual power running amok.”

“Spiritual power...running amok?”

Kojou’s mouth dropped open as he echoed the words.

Certainly, Nagisa was a priestess. Her knack for being a spirit medium was something she’d inherited from their grandmother on their father’s side, mixed with the psychometry she’d inherited from their mother, making her an exceptionally rare hybrid—until three years ago.

“That can’t be right. Nagisa lost her power because of that incident.”

When Kojou disagreed, Gajou glared at him ferociously.

“It’s the other way around, kid. Y’see, Nagisa’s been using her spiritual power *nonstop for the last three years.*”

“...What?”

“Well, it’s like this. She’s being possessed by the Fourth Primogenitor, even right this moment.”

“Possessed by...the Fourth Primogenitor...you say?”

“That’s right,” Gajou said with a grave nod.

“Three years ago, we called Nagisa to Gozo to help us wake up the twelfth Kaleid Blood because Nagisa’s priestess powers were really amazing at the time. Her compatibility with the Kaleid Blood, a legacy of the Devas, was really good. Too good.”

Gajou shifted his gaze to Avrora. The blond vampire twitched. Her entire body, greatly resembling Nagisa’s in stature, seemed to shrink.

“As expected, Nagisa succeeded in making contact with Dodekatos, who was sleeping in the Fairy’s Coffin—in other words, the girl sitting right next to you. If that’d been all, we could’ve taken our time waking Avrora up nice and slow. But...”—Gajou poured bitter-looking beer down his throat before continuing —“...that day, the ruins were attacked. The opposition was the Black Death Emperor Front—a beast-man-supremacist terrorist group. The end result was the destruction of the ruins examination team. About half the surveyors were killed, and the private military corporation guard team was wiped out. Miss Liana Caruana was killed while protecting you.”

Kojou’s supposedly lost memories reacted to the name, *Liana Caruana*. Suddenly, intense sadness welled up in him, crushing his chest, though he still didn’t understand why.

“I don’t know what happened after that, but I can guess.”

Gajou put down the now-empty bottle. By then, Kojou had already realized just why he, and only he, had been brought back to life as a vampire’s Blood Servant, while Nagisa straddled the line between life and death—

“Nagisa *made her* bring me back to life.”

“Exactly.”

A self-deprecating smile came over Gajou as he spoke. Just as Kojou regretted his failure to protect his little sister, the man had no doubt continued to blame himself for not being able to safeguard his own children.

“The Fourth Primogenitor had no reason to rescue you. It was Nagisa who asked her to bring you back to life. She probably dragged the Fourth Primogenitor’s powers out to save you. Then she used the primogenitor’s Beast

Vassal to wipe the floor with the terrorists.”

Kojou’s throat twitched as he uttered in a shaky voice, “And the price for that is her body’s weakness now...”

Vampiric Beast Vassals consumed the life spans of their hosts as the price of summoning them, so only vampires, possessing infinite negative life forces, were able to employ them.

Nagisa had to be a spiritualist with power off the charts. However, her flesh and blood was that of a frail human girl. There was no way it could withstand summoning a vampire’s Beast Vassal, let alone one of the Fourth Primogenitor’s. Controlling the Fourth Primogenitor herself was an absolute impossibility. Yet, even so, Nagisa had forced the Fourth Primogenitor into her own body and taken control—all to save her older brother, Kojou.

Kojou had meant to protect Nagisa, but it was he who had been protected. Nagisa had put her life on the line to save him, and in exchange, she was confined to a hospital.

With that desolate truth stabbing into him, Kojou couldn’t lose himself in a rage or tearfully shout. It was all he could do to just sit there and desperately clamp his teeth down on his lip, lost.

“Th-the curse...from my abominable original sin...”

It was not Kojou who cried, but rather, the blond girl at his side.

Clear drops poured out of Aurora’s blue eyes as she bawled like a child. Even Gajou stiffened, shocked by her sudden reaction.

“Why’re you crying? It’s not something you should feel responsible for, right?!”

As Aurora continued to sob, Kojou couldn’t help but wipe her face with a table napkin.

Certainly, Nagisa’s debilitation might have been from using the power of the Fourth Primogenitor, but Aurora was blameless. If anything, being yanked out of her seal in the ruin and turned into a research subject on Itogami Island made her a genuine victim.



“Ahh, well, that’s how it is,” Gajou said with a guilty look, scratching his head. “Besides, the reason the princess here lost her memory has to be related to you and Nagisa.”

Kojou looked at his father, somewhat surprised.

“You knew from the start that Avrora had lost her memory?”

“Yeah. It wouldn’t fit together otherwise.”

“...Fit together?”

“Think about it, kid. If the Fourth Primogenitor, supposed to be sealed in a ruin, is possessing Nagisa right now, who is the princess right here?”

His father was apparently testing him with the question.

Kojou nodded. “So she’s just a part of the Fourth Primogenitor’s personality?”

Gajou curled his lips up in what looked like a satisfied smile. “Probably something like that. If I wanted to be mean about it, I’d call it ‘whatever’s left of her.’ Or maybe the last dregs wrung out of her.”

“Why would you want to be mean about it?!”

“No matter how good a spiritualist Nagisa might be, she just doesn’t have the capacity to take in the entire Fourth Primogenitor. That’s why there’s a part of her consciousness left here in her body.” Gajou gazed at Avrora, who was still slightly teary.

Then, Kojou finally understood his father’s objective—his reason for cooperating with Veldiana to revive Avrora, and why he was secretly protecting Avrora now.

“I see...,” Kojou murmured, staring at the girl. “Then we just need to get the Fourth Primogenitor’s consciousness out of Nagisa and back into her real body... If she gets her memories and powers as a vampire back, we can save Nagisa?”

Avrora didn’t seem to understand. She appeared somewhat conflicted as she watched Kojou.

“Well, I suppose so,” Gajou said. “At the very least, if we keep her power in check, we can keep her from losing even more physical energy. It might take a

while, but Nagisa's condition would be a lot more stable than it is now. Well, probably," he added, shrugging away responsibility.

"So that's why you two woke up Aurora?"

Kojou sighed at length. Gajou had probably been searching for a way to save Nagisa all that time. That meant running all over the world, well away from his family. In the process, he'd met Veldiana and had learned about the existence of the Key to the coffin.

Maybe Mimori had been in on it. Now that he thought about it, it was unnatural how Mimori's assistant, Tooyama, had given Kojou that pass card at the most opportune moment.

Gajou narrowed his eyes in a pained expression as he vigorously tousled Kojou's hair.

"I suppose... Well, it's that, too."

"What do you mean?"

Kojou raised his brows suspiciously, but Gajou made no reply. His eyes narrowed sharply again, glaring at the night-darkened pier.

"Geez... they're already here. Faster than I expected."

Gajou emptied the last drops of his beer as he listlessly rose to his feet. He picked up a bullpup-style rifle. It was clearly an illegal firearm, but Kojou didn't care enough at that moment to point it out.

That was when, for some reason, the blond vampire girl's body quivered like a rabbit as she crouched against Kojou's arm. He looked at the bewildered girl.

"...Aurora?"

*Hiu*, Aurora squeaked, the sound coming out weakly as her body went rigid.

Then, Kojou noticed what had frightened her.

Aurora was staring at an unfamiliar figure standing on the marina's breakwater. It was a tall, middle-aged man in a suit, flanked by two guys dressed in black that looked like his bodyguards. They were no doubt comrades of the group that'd tried to abduct Aurora earlier.

However, Kojou's gaze was not drawn to the frightening men in black clothing, but to the sight of a different person standing behind them. It was a small figure that didn't even reach their shoulders.

"You're... Why are..." Kojou uttered, completely shocked.

The small thirteen-or fourteen-year-old girl that stood behind the men in black wore an unadorned protective suit made of reinforced fibers that resembled a biker's leather suit. Its surface was marked with a dry-looking Roman numeral, giving Kojou the impression that he was looking at a prototype weapon.

The girl looked at Kojou and the others emotionlessly. Her hair was blond. Her eyes gave off a pale blue radiance, like that of a flame. Her fleeting, fairy-like beauty greatly resembled the vampire girl quivering at Kojou's side.

Like mirror images.

"Why are there...two Avroras...?!"

Kojou's murmur died on the wind.

Unemotionally, the girl with the same face as Avroras continued staring at Kojou.

### 3

Veldiana Caruana opened her eyes atop an unfamiliar bed.

Around the bed was a ridiculously expensive canopy.

The rest of the room's interior was also extravagant, decorated with astonishingly beautiful antiques. The dazzling curtains looked like they were custom-ordered. Outside the window, she saw the beautiful nighttime landscape of the Demon Sanctuary.

"This is...?"

Veldiana awkwardly sat up and looked around.

It was probably the penthouse of a high-class apartment building or something close. She didn't seem to be confined in any way. The clothing she'd been wearing had been stripped off, replaced by bandages that wrapped

around her entire body. The slow healing of her wounds was no doubt the doing of the special anti-demon bullets. Even so, the bleeding had stopped. There was still a little pain, but her right leg, nearly ripped off, had somehow recovered enough that she could move it.

“So you’ve come to?”

Suddenly, someone spoke; Veldiana had no idea how long she’d been standing there. The voice had a slight lisp, but the tone had a strange gravitas to it—one with overwhelming majesty, more suited to an empress rebuking one of her ministers than for checking on the condition of an injured person.

The speaker looked like a young girl. She had long, dark hair and pale skin, and wore an ornate, Western-style dress.

“Urk...the Witch of the Void?!”

Driven by intense fear, Veldiana leaped out of the bed.

The Witch of the Void, aka Natsuki Minamiya, was a name synonymous with terror among the demons of Europe. Her image was less of a federal Attack Mage employed by the Japanese government than of a merciless genocidist. Even though Veldiana was well aware she could not escape, she was captive to the blind feeling that she had to run.

But Veldiana’s injured right leg would not bear the weight, and she lost her balance, tottering on the spot.

“Whoa?!”

The other person in the room cried out as Veldiana nearly fell over and crashed right into him. A glass on the tray he was carrying toppled, and the boy, wearing a school uniform with his spiky hair combed back, caught it just short of hitting the floor.

“You’re...Motoki?!”

“Yep. So we meet again, Vel.”

Motoki Yaze smiled like they were best buds as he poured cold water into the glass, offering it to her.

It was the second time that Veldiana had met the young Hyper Adapter. Now

that she thought of it, it was a small wonder that he, charged with monitoring Kojou Akatsuki, had caught wind of Veldiana's actions once again. However, as he smiled sarcastically, Veldiana could sense no hostility toward her in his eyes.

Natsuki looked down at Veldiana, now sitting on the floor, and sighed as she murmured, "Goodness, you certainly are fired up. Based on that, your wounds must be in fairly good shape."

Though somewhat exasperated, there was no aggressive subtext in her words, either.

"You two...saved me...?" Veldiana asked tentatively.

Natsuki glanced sideways at Yaze in visible displeasure.

"My good-for-nothing pupil asked me to."

"Pupil?"

*Maybe she means an apprentice Attack Mage*, thought Veldiana, becoming sure of it all on her own. Naturally, the Witch of the Void also being a middle school English teacher was beyond her wildest imagination.

Veldiana tilted the glass handed to her, emptying it into her mouth in a single gulp. As the dryness of her throat eased, she calmed down a little.

"Incidentally, where are my clothes?"

Veldiana pulled a sheet over her body, which was covered in nothing but underwear and bandages, as she asked.

Natsuki glanced at Veldiana in annoyance.

"Ah, I threw those tasteless rags out."

"You threw them out?!"

"They were covered in blood and riddled with bullet holes. I threw them away before they rotted."

"Wh...what am I supposed to do about fresh clothes, then?!"

To the nearly destitute Veldiana, that black leather suit was her sole, precious good set of clothes. Beyond that, she couldn't leave wearing nothing.

With Veldiana tearfully objecting, Natsuki sullenly looked back at her and said, “Fresh clothes are in the closet over there. I’ll give you whichever one you like. Choose.”

“Huh?”

Faced with those words, Veldiana dragged the sheets along with her as she headed toward the closet, but...

“There’s nothing but maid outfits?!”



Natsuki rebutted in a calm tone, “Of course. That’s where I keep my servant uniforms. In the first place, I doubt you could put on my clothes with your physique.”

Veldiana groaned, compelled to hold her tongue. She might have been small in stature as women of the Warlord’s Empire went, but Natsuki was twelve centimeters shorter still, and with narrower shoulders.

“Certainly that is the case, but...ugh, I, a daughter of Caruana, dressed as a servant...”

Veldiana voiced her complaints in a quiet murmur as she reluctantly selected an outfit. Her choice was far from minimalist, with a long skirt and full sleeves, but it was a maid outfit through and through.

With Veldiana having finally finished changing into fresh clothes, Natsuki abruptly asked, “Incidentally, Veldiana Caruana, you’re suspected of an attack on MAR, aren’t you?”

Veldiana, still tying her ribbon, awkwardly froze.

“Also, summoning a Beast Vassal in an urban area. Furthermore, you’re not wearing a demon registration bracelet.”

“Th-that’s...”

“It wouldn’t be any trouble to just hand you over to the Island Guard, but I am somewhat interested in your actions. If you are willing to provide information, I shall consider leniency.”

Natsuki sat on a velvet-covered chest as she spoke in a relaxed voice. It wasn’t a negotiation, but rather, one-sided blackmail. Veldiana didn’t want to challenge her; defiance didn’t even enter her mind.

“Fine, then... What do you wish to ask?”

Veldiana glared at Natsuki in regret. The witch’s eyes, rimmed with long eyelashes, narrowed.

“Nelapsi Nosferatu were the ones that attacked you, yes? Who is the man giving them orders?”



“...Balthazar Zaharias, Chairman of the Provisional Autonomous Government of Nelapsi. It is not accurate to call him a politician, though. He is an arms dealer, a merchant of death.”

“I have heard the name. A leading figure in the Fourth Ghoul War, yes?”

Natsuki's words made Veldiana's entire body shudder. Her face twitched from ferocious anger.

“That's right. Fourteen years ago, the war started with the invasion of the territory of the Duke of Caruana of the Warlord's Empire. At the time, Zaharias was supplying Nelapsi with weapons and troops. Thanks to that man, the Knights of Caruana were slaughtered...and the Duke of Caruana fell in battle...”

The Duke of Caruana who fell in battle was Veldiana's father. Having permitted the annihilation of the Knights drew the ire of the Lost Warlord, and the family of the Duke of Caruana was stripped of its lands. Veldiana was stripped of her nobility in the process. All stemmed from the plotting of the merchant of death named Zaharias.

Natsuki raised her voice in ill humor. “Why is this weapons broker on Itogami Island?”

Veldiana bit her lip as if unable to bear the disgrace.

“In the confusion of war, that man robbed the House of Caruana of the ninth Kaleid Blood. So he seeks the commencement of the banquet.”

“Banquet...?”

“The Blazing Banquet. I have heard it is the ceremony through which a true Fourth Primogenitor is awakened.”

Veldiana's explanation caused Natsuki to frown in contempt.

“Hmph...so the Nosferatu intend to raise a primogenitor to the throne.”

“That's right. It is a truly ridiculous notion,” Veldiana indignantly declared.

Yaze cut in with a low murmur of grudging admiration. “It'd work, though. If they get the Fourth Primogenitor, Nelapsi will turn into the capital of a new Dominion. There's no way the surrounding nations'll deny it recognition as an independent country then.”

“I suppose so. Besides, to a weapons merchant like Zaharias, having a product known as the World’s Mightiest Vampire must be an attractive proposition. If he sold it to say, beast-man supremacists, they could wipe a country or two off the map easily.”

Natsuki agreed as if it had nothing to do with her. Veldiana raised her eyebrows and grimaced.

“Surely they cannot be permitted to do such a thing?!”

“I see. And so, you awakened the twelfth Kaleid Blood to oppose their plans. Perhaps you thought you could avenge your father?”

“You have no right to judge me for that, demon-murdering Witch of the Void!”

Veldiana unwittingly lost her temper and yelled at Natsuki. Then she immediately paled as she recognized her own mistake. Even if she was beaten to death then and there for having earned the ire of the Witch of the Void, she had only herself to blame.

However, far from flying into a rage, Natsuki merely trained her sarcastic gaze on Veldiana as if the latter were a poorly trained dog, and she quietly folded the fan in her hand.

“I am not judging you... I am merely displeased. You speak very arrogantly for a girl in a maid outfit.”

Veldiana’s forehead sustained an oddly powerful blow, a hundred times stronger than the flick it had appeared to be.

“Ow! What’s with that logic?! Whose fault is it that I am wearing this to begin with?!” Veldiana cried tearfully.

Yaze watched the interaction between the two girls as if he was completely uninvolved as he said, “Blazing Banquet, huh... I understand where you stand, Vel, but Natsuki, isn’t this kind of bad?”

“Why are you addressing me so casually?!”

“Don’t call me by my first name.”

Scolded by both girls simultaneously, Yaze shrugged his shoulders a little.

“To begin with, there’s no way you thought up awakening the twelfth Kaleid Blood all on your own. Did Kojou’s dad put you up to it or something of the sort?”

“A-and what if he did?”

“Then I could at least praise you for that much. I mean, there ain’t any other way to save Nagisa, is there...?”

“To what do you refer...?” Anxiety suddenly seized Veldiana.

Yaze bared his teeth in visible irritation.

“I’m sure you meant to become the Elector and get your revenge on that Zaharias bastard, but that probably ain’t gonna happen.”

Yaze shifted his eyes toward the window in annoyance. There, a giant building, shaped like an inverse pyramid, stood against the backdrop of the fleeting darkness of night.

“Damn it. What the hell are Big Bro and them thinking...? The Board of Directors probably planned this from the start. And that’s why they made me Kojou’s watcher, huh?”

“...Motoki?”

Veldiana looked at Yaze in bewilderment. As Yaze pounded on the wall without a word, Natsuki continued where he left off.

“You awakened the twelfth Kaleid Blood for the sake of revenge against Zaharias, didn’t you, maid?”

“Y-yes... And who is a maid here?!”

“Why is Zaharias on Itogami Island? Why would he know that you released the seal on the Twelfth? In the first place, did you not think it mysterious that a conglomerate of MAR’s level would let go of its precious twelfth Kaleid Blood so easily?”

“Are you saying that someone set me up? Someone made me awaken Avrora?”

*That’s impossible*, Veldiana seemed to say as she shook her head.

Natsuki coldly examined her.

“One of MAR’s departments manufactures weapons. It is hardly unthinkable that it would have connections to a weapons merchant like Zaharias. Surely, it would not be difficult for a giant conglomerate like MAR to influence the government of Japan?”

“But...that’s...”

“Even if you had obtained the Kaleid Blood, you lack the land or title to qualify you to commence the banquet. Who benefits most from your having awakened the Twelfth?”

“It can’t be...”

The rebuttal left Veldiana at a loss for words. She weakly fell to her knees on the spot.

Natsuki’s red lips twisted a little as she continued to gaze coldly at the young woman.

“The ceremony to revive the Fourth Primogenitor. You’ve gotten yourself involved in quite a troublesome thing, Kojou Akatsuki—”

## 4

The slender man stroked his kaiser beard as he approached Kojou and the others. The man, flanked on either side by a figure in black, was reminiscent of a circus ringleader onstage in front of his audience.

Kojou and the others gazed dumbfounded as the man theatrically bowed.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please forgive my intruding upon your abode. Could you give me but a tiny bit of your time? Mmm, a splendid night, is it not?”

The man spoke cheerfully, but the glint in his eye was so cold, Kojou could not sense the slightest warmth. Aurora hid behind Kojou’s back as if avoiding the gaze of a reptile. Kojou was still shielding her with his body as he glared back at the men.

“You’re...the guys from before...”

Kojou’s voice was tinged with tension. He had no doubt that the black-

outfitted figures to the man's right and left were comrades of the group that'd tried to abduct Avrora. He knew the danger they presented. Earlier, Gajou had driven them off, but that engagement was a surprise attack. There was no guarantee Gajou could repel them the same way this time.

However, Gajou lifted his empty beer bottle high and laughed in good humor, as if greeting an old friend.

"Sorry, monsieur. If you'd arrived just a little sooner, I could have treated you to a cold brew, but as you can see..."

"No, no, pay no heed to that. Please forgive me for my lack of forbearance in not bringing anything. You must understand, we are a people of war operating as mercenaries..."

The man with the kaiser beard replied to Gajou's call with great courtesy. The corners of Gajou's lips rose impudently, even as he continued resting his rifle on his shoulder.

"Chairman Zaharias of Nelapsi, there are some nasty rumors going around about you."

"I believe you are rather notorious yourself, Professor Gajou Akatsuki, the Death Returnee. Please accept my apology for the great rudeness my compatriots showed toward you earlier."

"...Ah, so you didn't come for revenge?"

The man named Zaharias made a show of surprise at Gajou's question.

"It is the furthest thing from my mind. Indeed, as Elector of the banquet, I owe you an apology for my discourtesy."

"Hah... I see. So that's the story."

Gajou seemed delighted as he nodded, lazily leaning against the boat's railing.

Kojou watched his father with suspicion.

"What does that mean, Dad...? Don't just stand there and nod—explain, dammit. Why are there two Avroras...?"

"Avrora...? Ahh, you granted a name to Dodekatos. Hmm, that idea does have

some merit. Excellent weapons are often given titles and nicknames, after all.” Zaharias crossed his arms, nodding deeply in apparent admiration.

“If I may be so bold, allow me to introduce our Enatos. Once a prisoner in the former Duchy of Caruana in the Warlord’s Empire, she was liberated by our Nelapsian hands. She is the ninth Kaleid Blood.”

“Ninth...?”

Zaharias extended his right hand; behind stood the girl with the same face as Avrora. She had wavy blond hair and pale skin. Though she wore a plain defense suit made with reinforced fibers, it enhanced the elegant curves of her figure nonetheless. She looked so much like Avrora that Kojou could barely tell them apart.

“Do you know her, Avrora?” Kojou asked quietly.

“M-my memory carries no imprint of this mirror image...”

Avrora faintly shook her head. Perhaps the appearance of the girl named Enatos had surprised Avrora more than anyone.

Zaharias, seeing her reaction, raised his eyebrows, apparently finding it somewhat unexpected.

“My, to not know of her, she must not yet be fully awakened? Hmm.” He stroked his beard as if pondering the matter. “Very well. Allow me to explain—Kaleid Blood is the name of the project to give birth to a new primogenitor and of the prototypes for the Fourth Primogenitor constructed for that project. Created from the three primogenitors and the technology of the Devas, they are the ultimate god-killing weapons.”

“...Weapons...you say?”

Startled, Kojou stared at Zaharias.

Avrora worriedly huddled against Kojou’s back. Normally, no one would ever believe a timid girl like her was a weapon. Even so, Zaharias’s claim seemed oddly convincing. There were too many mysteries concerning Avrora to consider her to be *just* a vampire.

“Indeed, it is so. Our Enatos and your Dodekatos are weapons, constructed by

the same technology and for the same purpose. However, they made a mistake. To err is human, and it seems that the people of the ancient super-humans known as Devas were no exception.”

At that point, Zaharias opened his arms wide like an opera singer heralding the tragedy to come.

“In other words, as a complete Fourth Primogenitor, the Kaleid Bloods were too strong, too much to even be considered weapons.”

“...”

Kojou silently listened to Zaharias’s words.

Yes, the Fourth Primogenitor was considered the World’s Mightiest Vampire, destruction incarnate despite having no blood brethren, a cold-blooded monster beyond the doctrines of the world.

Surely there were no better words to describe an artificially crafted weapon.

“That is the Fourth Primogenitor—the World’s Mightiest Vampire, surpassing even the primogenitors, the oldest of vampire-kind. Its existence upset the global balance, throwing the world order into chaos. And so, Kaleid Blood was sealed away in places such as a windswept desert, or inside a coffin of ice.”

Kojou peered at Enatos. “So she was sealed away, too, just like Aurora...and that seal was broken...”

Zaharias’s eyes narrowed, somehow looking proud as he shook his head.

“It was not broken on its own—we broke it.”

“What for...?!”

“There is but one reason for taking the safety off a weapon—so that it may be used for war.”

Zaharias smiled, as if finding it strange that anyone would even ask. His tone was so natural that it left Kojou at a loss for words.

“Records remain of Kaleid Blood’s seal being removed several times in the past. Each time they awaken, a great turning point in history shall surely follow.”

Kojou looked between the two girls, Avrora and Enatos, and murmured, “You mean...there’s gonna be a big war somewhere in the near future?”

“It shall surely be so. The embers of conflict in this world have not burned out, after all.”

Zaharias lowered his eyes in sadness. He had the look of a cunning realist who used war for his own ends, well aware of the horror and tragedy that followed.

“You called her the ninth Kaleid Blood?”

“Indeed I did.”

“So there are others? Other candidates for Fourth Primogenitor like *these two*?”

“Yes, there are some ten others.”

After saying this, Zaharias frowned deeply.

“I believe even you can imagine just how dangerous they are. If elements of the Fourth Primogenitor, however incomplete, were to come into conflict, no one would be able to stop them.”

Zaharias’s shoulders shuddered as if he was genuinely afraid, and then he smiled.

“—But, please rest assured, it is a simple matter for someone in my occupation. I handle weapons on a daily basis. The uninformed might call us merchant of death and the like, but I can say with confidence that there are none more skilled in the employ of weapons than us.”

“You’re an...arms dealer...?”

Kojou finally realized why Zaharias was employing a silver tongue. The long digression about the Fourth Primogenitor hadn’t been out of any kindness toward Kojou. Zaharias was a merchant. Every word was part of a sales pitch. It was simply part of doing business.

“Now, Mr. Kojou Akatsuki, let us move on to the issue at hand.”

“...The issue at hand?”

“Yes. I would like you to hand Dodekatos, there with you, over to us.”



For the first time, Zaharias shifted his gaze right in Avrora's direction. The blond vampire girl's breath caught as if that gaze had cowed her into submission.

"You're telling me to sell Avrora to you?"

Kojou checked to make sure in a low, suppressed voice. Zaharias nodded imperiously.

"As compensation, hmm, would twenty billion yen be acceptable?"

"Wha...?!"

Kojou's eyes snapped open in surprise. Taking his reaction as dissatisfaction, Zaharias made a strained laugh.

"Hmm, it is not enough? Then I shall double—no, triple it. The product is the world's mightiest weapon, after all. I will not say that money isn't an object, but even my capital has its limits. I must ask you to make some concession on the price."

"The product...huh?"

Kojou made a small snort through his nose as he mulled Zaharias's words. He smiled to the frightened Avrora to reassure her, stepping forward as if to shield her.

"Sorry, she's not a weapon, and I'm not inclined to treat her like one."

"Is that so?—"

Zaharias's eyes sharpened. The figures in black at his sides seemed to become just a little more wary. They appeared poised to move at a moment's notice.

Gajou, leisurely leaning against the boat's guardrail, audibly removed the safety of his rifle.

It was only the girl named Enatos who gazed at Kojou without blinking. Then...

"That is unfortunate. However, please let me know if you change your mind, and by all means, do so before it is too late."

Surprisingly, Zaharias did not coerce the trade, instead retreating easily. Kojou, thinking that the man might take her by force, was nonplussed by his

reaction.

Yet, the feeling of tension, like a taut string, did not ease.

Kojou resisted the grain of the oppressive atmosphere and looked at the girl behind Zaharias and said, “Enatos...was it? If you don’t like being treated like a weapon, either, come with us. I can’t pay you any money, but I can give you some delicious ice cream to eat—”

The blond girl in the protective suit hesitated just a little.

That instant, Enatos was enveloped by an incredible gust of wind. The shrieking gale was on par with a mini-tornado. Perhaps it was anger toward Kojou, or perhaps fear of the unknown, but it adopted the form of a powerful shock wave.

A vibration rippled out—a destructive supersonic wave that indiscriminately wreaked havoc on the surrounding area. The surface of the sea thrashed violently, rocking the boat as it slammed into the pier, ruthlessly tearing off and smashing apart the planks.

The most frightening thing was that Enatos had not attacked. She had not summoned her own Beast Vassal. That slight stirring of her emotions had sent out a tiny fraction of her demonic power as the wave that had caused such destruction. Had her anger been trained on Kojou, he would have been annihilated in an instant. He knew that without anyone having to tell him. This was the power of the ninth Kaleid Blood, one element of the Fourth Primogenitor.

Abruptly, a figure stood in the path of Enatos’s gaze. A small girl with blond hair like a billowing flame—Avrora.

She stood in front of Enatos, arms wide, as if she was shielding Kojou.

Zaharias scolded the girl in the protective suit enveloped by the gale. “—Enatos!”

It was not clear if his voice even reached her. But in that moment, the vibrating wall that enveloped Enatos vanished as if it had never existed.

The wild, chaotic air returned to its previous calm. The surface of the sea

continued to undulate fiercely, rocking the boats tied to the dock, but it seemed they had escaped any further threat of fatal damage.

“Phew,” exhaled Gajou with a weary look. The black-outfitted men had an aura of relief hovering about them as well.

Avrora’s legs gave out; she would have collapsed on the spot had Kojou not supported her from behind just in time.

“Your pardon for this great discourtesy. However, I believe you now comprehend just how dangerous these prototypes are.”

Zaharias, the only one with a calm expression, bowed respectfully.

“I am certain that we will meet again someday. I hope, when that time comes, you will make a positive reply. Now, if you’ll excuse me,” said Zaharias, turning his back to Kojou and the others.

Kojou said nothing as he watched them depart. Thanks to the destruction of the lamppost, the surroundings were dark. The weapons merchant and the others mingled with the darkness, immediately lost to his sight.

The only thing he saw was the reflected light of Enatos’s hair, still burning into Kojou’s eyes.

The shimmering vibrant blond hair that changed colors like a rainbow.

## 5

“Whew...”

Kojou flopped onto the sofa on Gajou’s boat and exhaled, devoid of energy. His entire body felt as heavy as lead.

His shock toward Enatos had not yet faded. Kojou hadn’t meant to provoke her, but a single careless comment stirred her emotions, sending her demonic energy nearly out of control. He was still berating himself for his carelessness.

Even though they had such vast power, they were still but elements of the whole. Kojou couldn’t even imagine what an incredible monster one would evolve into after obtaining the complete power of the Fourth Primogenitor. He felt like he understood why Zaharias, an arms dealer, was so hung up on them.

On the other hand, Avrora, supposedly another of those elements, was sitting calmly right at Kojou's side, leaning forward like a domesticated dog.

"I-I praise thee!"

Haltingly and tense, the girl spoke in a falsetto.

Kojou shifted his suspicious gaze toward her bright red face.

"...Ah?"

As Avrora hung her head in silence, Gajou tossed out his own explanation.

"The princess must be happy you didn't sell her to Zaharias."

"Ahh, what, that?"

Kojou sat his sluggish body up and put his hand on Avrora's head to say, *You're welcome*.

Now that he knew just how dangerous the elements of the Fourth Primogenitor were, Kojou couldn't state with confidence that he'd made the right decision. He felt like the fact Avrora herself was happy about it was a considerable saving grace.

But Kojou's faint sense of relief was soundly wrecked as Gajou made a deep sigh and said, "You're a real idiot, too, though. That's sixty billion yen, you know. You could live off that for the rest of your life with room to spare, and you blew it off just like that."

"You don't need to tell me. I've got a bit of regret about it," Kojou bluntly confessed.

However, the vast sum that Zaharias had offered was too large for it to feel real. Kojou would have taken it far more seriously if it'd been more the size of a local lottery jackpot.

Gajou mused, "Well, I have my doubts Zaharias would've actually paid the money after you handed Avrora over. In a case like that, you might get killed and buried the moment you're no longer useful."

"Y-yeah...you have a point."

"Well, before it could come to that, if you turned out to be the sly kind of brat

who'd go for that kind of sweetheart deal, I would've shot you in the back and run off with the money myself..."

"Ugh, are you really my father?!"

Kojou's eyes were half-lidded as he murmured. It had sounded too genuine to be a joke, but that was Gajou Akatsuki being Gajou Akatsuki.

Gajou fished through some baggage inside the boat by himself for a while, finally standing up carrying a ridiculously large golf bag containing his rifle.

"Let's see... Kojou, take this."

Gajou tossed something as he spoke. It was a cheap, rust-covered key chain.

"What's...this?"

"The key to the boat. As for how to use everything, well, you'll get the gist of it. Or rather, you'd better."

With that self-serving advice, Gajou stepped off the boat, leaving Kojou and Avrora behind.

"Hold on a sec, Dad. Where do you think you're going?"

"I've got things to do. Setting Mimori aside, I'd better make sure Nagisa's completely safe... Geez, now I'm buried with more work because some brat had to pick a fight with Zaharias without thinking," Gajou explained, annoyed.

Kojou pursed his lips.

Certainly, Gajou had a point. In the first place, Gajou had orchestrated Avrora's awakening for the sake of Nagisa's treatment. His daughter falling into even greater danger because an arms dealer was pursuing Avrora would be the opposite of what he intended to do. But...

"What are we going to do about Avrora...?"

"I'll leave that to you."

"What?!"

"I'll lend you this boat for the time being. Well, just the fact he broke character and offered you a deal means that bastard Zaharias can't get too out of line. To him, Itogami Island is completely foreign territory."

“Er, but...”

Naturally, Kojou was less than satisfied with his father’s irresponsible statement. At any rate, the black-robed figures under Zaharias had nearly killed him mere hours before. He suspected he couldn’t trust the “can’t get too out of line” part very far.

However, Gajou laughed flippantly, not a trace of tension visible on his face.

“Relax. Avrora’s a prototype in the same league as little Ena from earlier. That bastard Zaharias knows well enough how dangerous that princess can be. Now that he knows she’s fond of you, he can’t lay a finger on ya.”

“Th-that so...”

Kojou grudgingly accepted his father’s point of view. Gajou seemed to have at least some basis for declaring that they were safe. “Looks like you get it,” Gajou said, puffing up with pride at his victory. “More important is her memories. It’ll be faster to just get those back rather than worrying about every little thing.”

“Well, I’m sure you’re right about that...”

Kojou was a bit at a loss as he gazed at Avrora, who wore a surprised expression.

“But how am I supposed to get her memory back...?”

“Hell if I know. I’m an archaeologist, not a doctor. Think for yourself for once.”

Kojou resentfully clicked his tongue and vented, “Do you have any sense of responsibility?!”

Of course, he hadn’t been stupid enough to expect Gajou to say, *Just leave everything to me*, but that advice was way too sketchy without an actual plan to retrieve her memory, even for him.

Despite this, Gajou said without a hint of shame, “It might not be much to go on, but giving you useless advice? Now that would be irresponsible. Why don’t you just try giving her lots to experience? Show her this and that, get her to meet people?”

“And that’s *not* irresponsible advice?”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff. Anyway, Zaharias won’t make a serious move yet. Get along with Avrora in the time before he does, ’kay?”

“...Yeah.”

Kojou nodded, serious now.

It irked him to do as his father said, but he knew from the depths of his heart that he couldn’t abandon Avrora. It wasn’t just that he was her Blood Servant or that she was connected to Nagisa. More than those things, if he walked away from a fainthearted, amnesiac girl, it’d be hard to sleep at night. Way too hard.

Then Gajou, on the verge of leaving the cabin, looked back and pointed to Avrora’s skirt as if he’d just remembered something.

“Ahh, one more thing, Kojou. You really need to get some panties on the princess. Even on an island with year-round summer, she’ll catch a cold like that.”

Kojou coughed loudly.

“How did you know she’s not wearing any?!”

“Heh... Don’t underestimate a middle-aged man’s powers of observation.”

Gajou seemed oddly proud of himself as he spoke, leaving the boat for real this time.

Kojou slumped back down onto the sofa and sighed deeply. “Geez, I see your face after so long, and then this happens... Shitty dad you are.”

“I-I sense a troubled bloodline.”

“You sayin’ I have something in common with that perv?!”

Kojou glared sideways at Avrora’s red face, putting his chin on his palm in annoyance.

It wasn’t that there had been no word from the man at all, but it’d been three years since he’d seen his father’s face for any length of time. Gajou was as self-absorbed as ever, and it annoyed him, but Kojou had missed him all the same.

Regardless, he could accept that the man had been working hard to save Nagisa the whole time. Kojou felt like overlooking most of his frustration.

“Well...we really need to do something about underwear. You can't just keep wearing Nagisa's uniform, either. Well, let's think about that in the morning.”

“V-very well.”

Avrora continued studiously holding down her skirt as she agreed.

“At any rate, just the fact we have somewhere to sleep at night is a huge help. We've got electricity. No worries about toilets or a bathtub from the looks of it, either.”

Kojou looked around the cabin of *The Liana* as he spoke. Though it was a small boat, the room was not lacking in basic necessities. It had a table in the kitchen, a sofa and bed, and even a refrigerator and an electric range, everything you'd need to get by day-to-day. The harbor provided the electricity. It might have been a better deal than getting a room at an ultra-cheap hotel.

Avrora gave an awkward, fleeting smile, apparently satisfied.

“'Tis clean and orderly.”

“Yeah, it is... It's oddly well-kept for a place my dad's been living in...”

For a moment, Kojou felt admiration, but he was suddenly captive to his suspicions.

As far as he could remember, Gajou Akatsuki left no impression of liking things clean. Invariably, be it his own bedroom or office at work, everything was in chaos. Kojou wondered if he had heard that his daughter had become such a neat freak that it had helped put her in the hospital, and this was his response.

Still, the only time Gajou's room was clean was when the women in his life did it for him. Now that he thought about it, he did sense the lingering aroma of perfume in the cabin.

“Well, whatever...”

Kojou told himself, *I didn't notice nothin'*, and closed his eyes to it all.

She might not have looked it, but Mimori was jealous to a surprising extent. If Gajou inadvertently got too friendly with other women, the woman he married would fly into an indiscriminate rage toward all around her. In an exceptionally troublesome situation such as theirs, he wanted to avoid the breakout of a



parental dispute as much as possible.

“Figures that I’m worn out today. I think I’ll head home and sleep...”

Kojou checked the boat’s clock as he sluggishly rose to his feet. As he did so, Avrora, playing on the cabin’s bed, lifted her face, looking surprised.

Comfortable as it might be, it was still a cramped boat. Even if she was a vampire with power beyond a human, he wasn’t comfortable with sleeping under the same roof as a girl he’d essentially just met. If he could trust Gajou’s words, Zaharias ought to keep his hands off Avrora for the time being. Kojou reasoned that she’d be fine even if he wasn’t guarding her around the clock.

However, Avrora looked up at Kojou with eyes like an abandoned kitten, desperately clinging to his sleeve. Kojou was a bit at a loss at her unexpected, excessive reaction.

“Avrora?”

“...F-for the peace of my soul, I shall seal my pact with thee with my palm.”

“Umm...meaning, you’d like me to hold your hand until you fall asleep?”

Avrora nodded twice, earnestly assenting. When Kojou saw that, he finally remembered the photograph he saw in Gajou’s scrapbook—one of the girl sleeping, sealed away in a coffin of ice.

“I see...you’ve been asleep by yourself all this time...”

The vampire girl meekly lowered her eyes in response to his murmur.

Even without her memories, the despairing level of isolation must have carved itself in Avrora’s heart like a sort of trauma. He could hardly blame her for being afraid of sleeping alone.

Kojou wondered if she might harbor anxiety, like, *Will I be alone again after I wake up?* or *Will I ever awaken again?*

“Got it. I’ll spend the night with you. But at least wash up and brush your teeth before bed.”

“...Nn!”

Hearing Kojou’s words, Avrora ran into the bathroom with great haste. The

unit installed in the small cabin apparently accommodated showers as well.

“*Hiu...!*”

Avrora was trying to wash up when she let out a fleeting cry and fell on her backside. She’d tried to use the soap dish and toothbrush in the lavatory, but Kojou heard them scatter across the floor. Kojou appeared dubious as he approached the bathroom, where he saw a vampire who was now dripping wet.

“Avrora?”

“I-I am stricken by the curse of Undine...!”

“Ahh... You turned the tap for the shower, huh...”

Apparently, she’d meant to get water out of the faucet, only to be bathed in a cold shower from overhead. It was the kind of mistake made even by modern people not familiar with prefabricated bathrooms. Avrora, sealed in a ruin for many years, had no way to understand its design. It was Kojou’s fault for not explaining.

“Here, it’ll be all right now.”

Kojou stopped the water flowing from the showerhead and offered Avrora a hand. *Can you get up?* he motioned.

Water dripped from Avrora’s entire body as she rose to her feet, dejected. Kojou swiftly averted his eyes. He could see right through the drenched uniform that clung to her bare skin.

“Kojou?”

Avrora, looking up to see Kojou unnerved, curiously blinked her eyes. Then, her gaze dropped to her own wet figure. Her face flushed a boiling hot red to the tips of her ears.

“W-wait, Avrora...calm down...!”

“U...uu... Abominable, impure eyes!” Avrora resentfully looked up at Kojou. “May they be cursed!”

Coming from a girl who might become a vampire primogenitor, the words felt particularly ominous.

*Gimme a break*, thought Kojou, twisting his lips.

“You just exploded all by your lones—aahhh?!”

“What do you think you’re doing, rank commoner!”

Kojou, suddenly sustaining a painful kick from behind, was slammed straight into a wall.

The corner of his vision displayed a seductive brunette vampiress. For some reason, Veldiana was dressed in a maid outfit as she glared down at Kojou with a frightful visage.

“Ugh... Ow, ow, ow... Vel? What the heck are you doing...?!”

“Gajou contacted me and said that Avrora was being sheltered here. Gajou lent me the use of this boat first. And yet, what have you put Avrora through, taking advantage of my absence...!”

Veldiana complained as she used a towel to wipe off Avrora, still soaking wet. Avrora physically shrank, perhaps surprised by the sudden appearance of the vampiress.

“Ah... I see. Well, then...”

*So there was a woman.* Kojou sighed, comprehending why the cabin had been tidied up.

“So why are you in a maid outfit?”

“Shut up!”

Veldiana’s shoulders quivered as she looked down at her attire; perhaps she associated it with some kind of negative experience.

“And to think Dodekatos’s Blood Servant is a rank commoner. How can my dream of restoring the Caruana family be...? No, do not give up, Veldiana! I must hold myself together for Sister’s sake! I must protect Avrora!”

Veldiana began mumbling to herself as she became lost in her own world. Avrora, now dry, gazed at her in concern as she shifted toward Kojou.

“...Kojou?”

Avrora tilted her head curiously as Kojou laughed. He was clutching his own

belly as he guffawed, relieved from the bottom of his heart.

She might have been the pride and joy of a duke long ago, but the vampiress named Veldiana Caruana, once vampire high society, was a pauper in spite of that. Mentally, she was somewhat naive; nor did her combat ability seem particularly high. However, she seemed to genuinely value Avrora. Now that he thought back to their first meeting, Veldiana made certain Avrora could safely escape, even if that meant putting herself in danger.

“Nah, I’m just glad, Princess. Looks like I’m not the only one trying to keep you safe.”

Kojou patted Avrora’s head as he showed her a gentle smile.

She wasn’t by herself anymore. She didn’t need to sleep alone and afraid any longer.

Perhaps Kojou’s feelings shone through, for the blond vampire girl shyly looked down and said, “Indeed.”

She said it in a voice quiet enough to vanish, but her small smile looked happy.

That was what happened on the day Avrora Florestina met Kojou Akatsuki. It was the beginning of a tale inexorably moving toward its conclusion.

## *Intermission ii*

It was the line between consciousness and unconsciousness.

It was the furthest reaches of the mind where none might enter, a gentle place that resembled primordial chaos.

In that world, a gentle, aurora-colored haze hovered about as two people smiled.

The two girls, small in stature, resembled one another. One was a girl with long black hair; the other, a girl with blond hair like billowing flames.

Both floated, their young hearts bare to each other. They were curled up, like twins in the womb, their slender fingers intertwined as the world continued to hover around them.

“So we meet again...,” the girl with long black hair said, opening her eyes.

She giggled and smiled, as if a kitten were rubbing against her, and narrowed her eyes in apparent fondness.

“Allow me to thank you for meeting me once more, young priestess.”

The blond girl opened her eyes as well, replying in a halting tone.

Her blue eyes seemed to glimmer, but somehow, they swayed with melancholy.

The black-haired girl looked back upon them, looking a little conflicted as she forced a smile.

“Oh yeah... I collapsed again, didn’t I? Must’ve lost the volleyball game. Aww, now Kojou’s gonna be all worried. The hospital food is tasty, too, but food loses something when you eat alone.”

“...I mourn that you must suffer for my sake.”

The blond girl lowered her eyes, looking like she was about to break into tears.

The black-haired girl shook her head, making her long hair sway.

“You don’t need to apologize. You helped me, didn’t you?”

“However, thy allotted time is approaching its end. There now lingers precious little demonic energy in what remains of me.”

“...I suppose so. I get it. Mm... I get it.”

The black-haired girl received the blond girl’s painful confession with a faint smile.

“Kojou would be upset if he found out about us, huh?”

“Thou art innocent. ’Tis I whom he should curse.”

“We’re both in this together.”

The warmth of her body reached the other girl through their intertwined fingers. The blond girl’s skin was cold. The black-haired girl embraced the frail being, like a little woodpecker starving without any mistletoe.

“I cannot thank you enough.”

The blond girl’s voice was distant. Her very being was dissolving into the fleeting mist.

“Guess we’ve got to part again for a little while.”

The black-haired girl smiled, but the expression betrayed some loneliness. She felt her consciousness slowly rising like a bubble born at the bottom of the sea. She was still among the living; her flesh and blood was awakening, and she would remember nothing about that world.

“Proud priestess, I pray that you live in everlasting peace and happiness.”

The black-haired girl heard the blond girl’s prayer as if it echoed from a distant place.

“You too—”

The awakening girl murmured too softly to be heard:

*You too, Aurora.*



CHAPTER THREE  
BLOOD SERVANT

## CHAPTER THREE

### BLOOD SERVANT

#### *1*

In the first week of December, a sense of tepid boredom had taken hold of the classroom.

It was the Monday directly following the conclusion of Itogami Island's greatest home-grown celebration, the Harrowing Festival. After several days of costume parades, stage events, dancing girls on floats, and part-time jobs, many of the students were burned out.

Kojou, sitting among such classmates, remained in solitary contemplation with an oddly grave expression. Noticing this, Asagi Aiba tilted her head with a suspicious look and leaned closer.

"What's wrong? Your face is all serious for once."

"Ahh, Asagi?"

Something really did seem to be eating at Kojou, and Asagi guardedly raised an eyebrow.

"...Kojou?"

"I guess you're the only one I can count on. I have a little favor to ask you... Are you free after school?"

"Wh-what? Out of the blue?"

Asagi, sitting in the seat in front of Kojou, smiled jokingly. She seemed tense as she listened carefully for his response. With a sober look, Kojou drew his face closer and whispered in a low voice, "I want a bra. I'll pay, of course."

After a moment's silence, Asagi's long eyelashes fluttered as her eyes blinked wide.



“...Huh?”

The next moment, Kojou’s vision shuddered, accompanied by a dull *whump*. Asagi’s straight punch, delivered immediately without so much as a wind-up, slammed straight into the bridge of Kojou’s nose.

Kojou, unable to withstand the pain, arched back and pressed a hand to his face.

“That hurt! Why’d you slug me all of a sudden?!”

“Why do I have to sell you a bra?! Just who do you think I am?!” Asagi shouted, tears glistening in the corners of her eyes.

Hearing her cry, every boy in the class began murmuring all at once.

Thanks to her blunt and candid manner of expression, Asagi was often ridiculed as having no sex appeal, but her handsome face meant she had numerous secret, devoted fans. Several of them carelessly exclaimed, “Asagi’s bra?!” “Would you sell it to me?!” and “I-I’d rather have your panties!” to which Asagi shouted:

“Like hell!!”

Kojou pressed on the tip of his nose as he excused himself in an earnest voice.

“Who’d want *you* to hand over your bra? I wanted to meet you later and ask you to go shopping for women’s underwear with me.”

Asagi continued to glare at Kojou with a deeply suspicious look.

“What the hell for?”

“Sorry, but I can’t do it alone. Nagisa still can’t be out and about, so please?”

Kojou deeply bowed his head. Of course, he needed underwear for Avrora. Unlike panties, something you could buy at a convenience store, measuring her for a bra was a difficult proposition. Kojou didn’t even know how to properly measure her, and bringing Avrora into an underwear store by himself presented its own high hurdles. Sending Avrora, a shy girl who didn’t know how to conduct herself, to shop on her own was out of the question.

So for those reasons, Avrora was remaining bra-less for the time being, but

Itogami Island's everlasting summer necessitated dressing light, which led straight to the real problem: It was far too provocative for a healthy middle school boy like Kojou. In addition, he'd already firmly established that he couldn't rely on Veldiana's taste in clothes. By process of elimination, his only way to resolve the dilemma was to seek Asagi's help.

"It's not Nagisa who asked? Who's it for, then?"

"Ahh...for a vampire I got to know just lately. She needs to buy a few changes of clothes."

Kojou left out the part about her being an unregistered demon, but otherwise replied honestly. But Asagi immediately filled in the blanks.

"A girl from off the island? So special reasons?"

"I suppose so. There's a whole lot of things going on—some simple, some complicated."

Kojou grimaced as he replied in a flippant tone. Naturally, he wasn't dumb enough to include that she might be a candidate to become the Fourth Primogenitor.

*Hmm*, Asagi thought, putting a finger to her lips, pondering the matter.

"So she's the reason you've been busy lately?"

"More or less. Somehow I got forced into looking after her."

"Is the girl cute?"

"I suppose so... I guess she's more odd than cute, though."

Kojou replied to Asagi's nonchalant inquiry with honesty. From her outward appearance alone, Aurora would seem to be the picture of a fairy, but she had a few loose screws even without the amnesia.

"Well, Asagi, if you can't do it, I'll have to try someone else, like one of the juniors in the girls' basketball club. Sorry for asking a weird favor."

"Wait, you! I never said I wouldn't do it!!"

Kojou was starting to rise out of his chair when Asagi nabbed him by the wrist.

"More importantly, you are *definitely* bringing that vampire girl along."

“...Guess I do have to bring her, huh?”

Kojou was a little hesitant to accept Asagi’s suggestion. He felt more than a little nervous about Avrora meeting Asagi face-to-face, but...

“Of course not. We can’t exactly measure her sizes without her!”

“Ahh, yeah. I guess there’s that, too...”

“Good grief...” Asagi exhaled with an exasperated look.

“Geez, what a bother,” Kojou added quickly. Of course, he couldn’t exactly say something like, *not like Avrora’s breasts are gonna get me excited anyway*.

That was when Motoki Yaze, half-listening to the discussion, interjected.

“Heya, sounds like you’ve havin’ a fun conversation. Kojou’s gonna introduce a girl to us?”

“I don’t really mind introducing her, but...”

Kojou concurred languidly. He felt like a guy at least as overbearing as Yaze would be essential if Avrora was going to overcome her timid thought process.

“Huh? Seriously?”

A look of surprise came over Yaze; perhaps he never thought Kojou would grant permission so easily. His childhood friend Asagi grinned at him, on the verge of laughter as she said, “But of course. You can afford the latest girls’ fashions in Western clothes, can’t you, Motoki?”

“...Huh?”

“I see, that’s a big help.”

Kojou, playing along with Asagi’s suggestion, nodded with a serious expression.

As a matter of fact, Kojou was starting to get anxious about being able to pay for Avrora’s change of clothes with his meager finances. He was genuinely grateful that they’d be working with a larger budget.

However, just as Kojou let his guard down, Asagi shifted a hostile glance in his direction.

“Don’t talk like it isn’t your problem, Kojou,” she said. “You are definitely paying me back for this. A-after all, this time you have m-me going shopping with you...!”

Asagi’s clumsy invitation to Kojou drew an *ooh* and a look of admiration from Yaze. The girls around them waited with bated breath and sparkling eyes for Kojou’s reaction.

“Really...?”

But Kojou, the center of their attention, did not toss them a single bone this time. The color of his face was worsening as he earnestly said, “Oh yeah, you’ve been pestering me to take you to this fried chicken place on Island East...”

“Yeah, that! They have a sale until this weekend, double the size for the same price!”

“All right, all right. I’ll take you there this time,” Kojou said and limply slumped onto his desk.

Asagi somehow looked satisfied, as if she was telling herself, *I think I did pretty good by my standards*. All the girls in class watched the two, mentally shouting, *Fried chicken?!*

“They really are hopeless.” Yaze sighed heavily.

That autumn day, the middle school seniors spent their time in brief, transient peace—

## 2

“Welcome back, Master.”

So spoke Veldiana, wearing a black, gothic-style maid outfit, elegantly bowing her head at the entrance to a darkly lit, Western-style establishment. The corners of her lips, smeared with red rouge, curled up, making a show of her sharp canine teeth as if to awe someone. But...

“Wrooooong!”

“Eeep!”

Veldiana jumped in surprise as a loud voice suddenly shouted at her.

A middle-aged, broad-shouldered man stood behind Veldiana. He was wearing a black tuxedo with a high-collared mantle over it. A demon registration bracelet glinted on his left wrist. He was an Old Guard vampire with greater status than Veldiana. He was also the proprietor of Hell Demon House—a demon café just opening on Itogami Island.

The proprietor glared at the frightened Veldiana with crimson eyes as he spoke in a high-pitched voice.

“That’s just wrong, Caruana baby. This isn’t a maid café. Your job is to make all your fans happy to have come all the way to a Demon Sanctuary just to see you. Understand?”

“Y-yes, I’m very sorry. But how do I actually do that...?”

Veldiana continued holding a tray as she wiped the sweat from her brow.

To Veldiana, raised with a silver spoon in her mouth, greeting customers was uncharted territory. However, with nothing special in the way of education or work experience, she inevitably gravitated to a place of employment that would make use of her sex appeal.

“Like this. Pay close attention.”

As a perplexed Veldiana looked on, the proprietor began a mock performance. With a flourish of his black mantle, he adopted a pose like that of a Kabuki actor, laughing haughtily as he threateningly proclaimed, “Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Pathetic little lambs, weelcome to this house of terror-stained tragedy. Present your lifeblood before the Great King of Darkness! Do so, and thy wishes shall be granted!”

The demonstration by the high-ranking vampire proprietor drew a shower of fervent *oooh*’s from the customers inside the establishment. Cameras flashed here and there as applause and shouts of admiration rose from the crowd.

“Err...am I to use a line like that when taking customers’ orders...?”

Veldiana’s face twitched. She’d heard that the job required her to play a feudalistic demon lord from the Dark Ages, but it was more distressing than she had expected. It was far worse than being a circus sideshow.

“That’s right. I’ll leave the rest to you, ’kay? See there, new customers are coming in right now.”

For some reason, the proprietor finished his pep talk with a more feminine tone and went back toward the kitchen.

“...Why must a daughter of Caruana such as I...suffer such disgrace...!”

A forlorn smile came over Veldiana as she shuddered from the humiliation. That very moment, the restaurant’s front door opened, and a group of four students entered.

*I just need to get it done*, thought Veldiana as she carefully picked up silver knives from the cutlery station, reaching for five and holding them stylishly in her hand. She spun around quickly with a flutter of her skirt, cackling shrilly at the dumbfounded customers.

“F...fwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Pathetic little lambs, welcome to this house of t-terror-stained tragedy!”

“Eeek?!”

Veldiana’s ears detected the frail lament of a frightened girl. For some reason, she felt like she’d heard that voice before.

“...Eeek?”

Veldiana was frozen in place as a small-statured, blond vampire girl and a middle school boy carrying department store paper bags in both hands stood before her.

“Ah...hiya,” Kojou said to Veldiana with an awkward, amiable smile and a nod.

Avrora hid behind Kojou’s back, squirming as her entire body trembled.

A girl who seemed to be a friend of Kojou Akatsuki cocked her head to the side as she stared at Veldiana with a curious look. She was a middle schooler with elegant features and wearing fashionable clothing.

“What? Some acquaintance of yours, Kojou?”

“...Kojou?! What are you doing here...?!”

In her panic, Veldiana unwittingly dropped the knives. Kojou managed to

catch the cutlery a split-second before it hit the floor.

“Ah...we’re in the middle of shopping, Vel. Clothes and stuff. Aurora said she wanted to see where you were working, so...”

“Wh... wh...”

Veldiana, in danger of going into the red, had begun the part-time job some two weeks prior. After working as a dishwasher while she learned the ins and outs, she’d finally been issued a uniform the day before. The previous night, she had bragged to Aurora all about it, with the inevitable result that others witnessed Veldiana, no longer the owner of a Kaleid Blood, working as an entry-level employee at a part-time job.

Aurora looked completely terrified as she weakly murmured, “H-house of tragedy...?!”

Apparently, pure as she was, Aurora seriously believed what Veldiana had spoken. Veldiana desperately attempted to mollify the teary-eyed girl.

“N-no! This is a demon café catering to tourists... I mean, it’s all a made-up performance!”

Hearing Veldiana break the mood inside his establishment, the proprietor marched right over, radiating bloodlust. His unfaltering smile was the scariest of all.

“...Oh, Caruana, hon?”

“Er...”

Cowed by the pressure coming from the proprietor, Veldiana’s face froze stiff.

“N-no, I wasn’t— This is... There are complicated circumstances that...!”

“Be silent. Guide the lambs to the altar of sacrifice and be quick about it!”

“Eh?! Ah, yes... Please, come this way!”

Veldiana was halfway to tears as she led Kojou and the others to their seats. Aurora walked very gingerly, thoroughly intimidated by the restaurant’s atmosphere, but Kojou’s backup apparently was keeping her fear under control.

*Why is this happening to me?* thought Veldiana with a sigh as she leaned

against a wall.

A middle school boy wearing headphones around his neck dropped by to whisper to her—Motoki Yaze.

“Man, you were really into that earlier, Vel. You’re a true noble. That outfit looks really good on you, too.”

“Motoki...why you...!”

Yaze wore a teasing smile as Veldiana glared back at him, sulking.

Judging from Yaze’s demeanor, he’d known where she had been working from the start. Having said that, he didn’t seem to be mocking Veldiana for taking a part-time job. If anything, Yaze was relieved that the young former noblewoman vampire was getting used to Itogami Island life.

“Well, it’s a good thing you found a job, isn’t it? Lately, it’s been tough to find work in this Demon Sanctuary. You must’ve gotten a formal visa, huh?”

“Well, yes...”

Veldiana confirmed Yaze’s assumption with a bitter expression.

She’d been focused on obtaining the twelfth Kaleid Blood, thinking it would be sufficient to avenge her father and older sister. Once Aurora awakened as the Fourth Primogenitor, she would become a minister in a Dominion under Aurora’s rule, re-establishing the House of Caruana. That was the future Veldiana had mapped out in her mind.

But it was not to be. Aurora had not awakened as the true Fourth Primogenitor, nor had the Lion King Agency formally recognized her as Elector. Indeed, her funds for day-to-day living were approaching a desperately low level; as a result, she was working part-time day in and day out.

Veldiana did not feel like this was misfortune. Even she could tell she was getting used to this life a little more every day. However, she felt some guilt—that the sole survivor of the House of Caruana could find solace in such a lifestyle...

“But no. I did not come to this Demon Sanctuary for such a thing.”

Veldiana murmured it as if trying to make excuses to herself.



Surely there was no way Motoki Yaze could have heard her, but she saw him turn his head. Veldiana pretended not to notice his concerned look; then she departed, as if fleeing from him.

### 3

Avrora ordered something referred to on the menu as “The Forbidden Fruit.” Behind the pretentious name was a fairly ordinary pancake. Regardless, it looked tasty, and Avrora, seeing one for the first time, was initially bewildered. She seemed ready to take the pat of butter resting atop it and wolf it down whole when Kojou stopped her.

“No. That’s not how you eat this kind of dish.”

“...Um?”

“Like this. You know how to use a fork and a knife, right?”

“I-indeed.”

Kojou looked like he was taking care of a little girl as he cut up Avrora’s pancake. Then, he took the seal off the chocolate pen that had come with it.

“Then, you use this, like so...”

“Ohhh!”

Avrora’s eyes glittered with excitement when she saw that Kojou had clumsily drawn a cat on the surface of the pancake. Avrora promptly snatched the chocolate pen from Kojou’s hand and immediately began copying him with her own scribbles. Kojou felt like a parent as he watched her.

Asagi had puffed her cheeks, blowing bubbles into her juice as she watched Kojou and Avrora’s familiar behavior.

Avrora finally tired of playing and took a sip from her hot coffee. That instant, her fairylike face twisted in forlorn despair.

“O...ohhh... ’tis Medea’s black curse of vengeance...!”

*Daa*, she gurgled, coffee dribbling from her lips as Avrora writhed in disgust. She’d said she’d drink the same thing Kojou was having, but apparently she didn’t actually know what coffee tasted like.

“You all right, Aurora...? Sheesh, that’s what you get for forcing yourself to drink that.”

*Goodness*, Kojou thought, wiping the spilled coffee before heading to get a replacement. He bought a melon soda and came right back.

“Here, this is for you.”

“Uu...”

For a while, Aurora gazed guardedly at the artificially dyed green liquid, but finally, she meekly brought the glass to her lips and opened her eyes in surprise.

“Supreme in taste! Like the nectar of Amrita?!”

Aurora, deeply moved by the carbonated drink, had moist eyes as she drank the glass of melon soda dry in one go. She audibly sipped on the straw, regretful that there was no more, when she made a rather cute hiccup. Looking at her, you’d never think she was a prototype for the World’s Mightiest Vampire.

She wanted seconds, so Kojou went back to the bar for more.

“Hmph. You underestimate me, Aurora. For an encore, I’ll do...this!”

Kojou proudly puffed his chest out as he mixed two kinds of drinks together.

“A vortex of chaos has erupted...!”

Aurora’s breath caught at the mixing of a light yogurty drink with black cola. Asagi gazed distantly at their kindergarten-level antics as she let out a sigh of apparent displeasure.

“Well, the girl *is* cute.”

Though she had a sulky expression on her face, Asagi’s voice was even.

Objectively speaking, Aurora was without doubt a very pretty girl. Her manner of speech might have been pompous, but her innocent personality, lacking any ill will whatsoever, made her easy to like. She seemed sheltered to the point you doubted she was from modern times, but she adapted well and was eager to learn. She could understand why Kojou was fussing over her for every little thing.

As if deliberately pushing the nervous Asagi into a corner, Yaze said, “It’s a

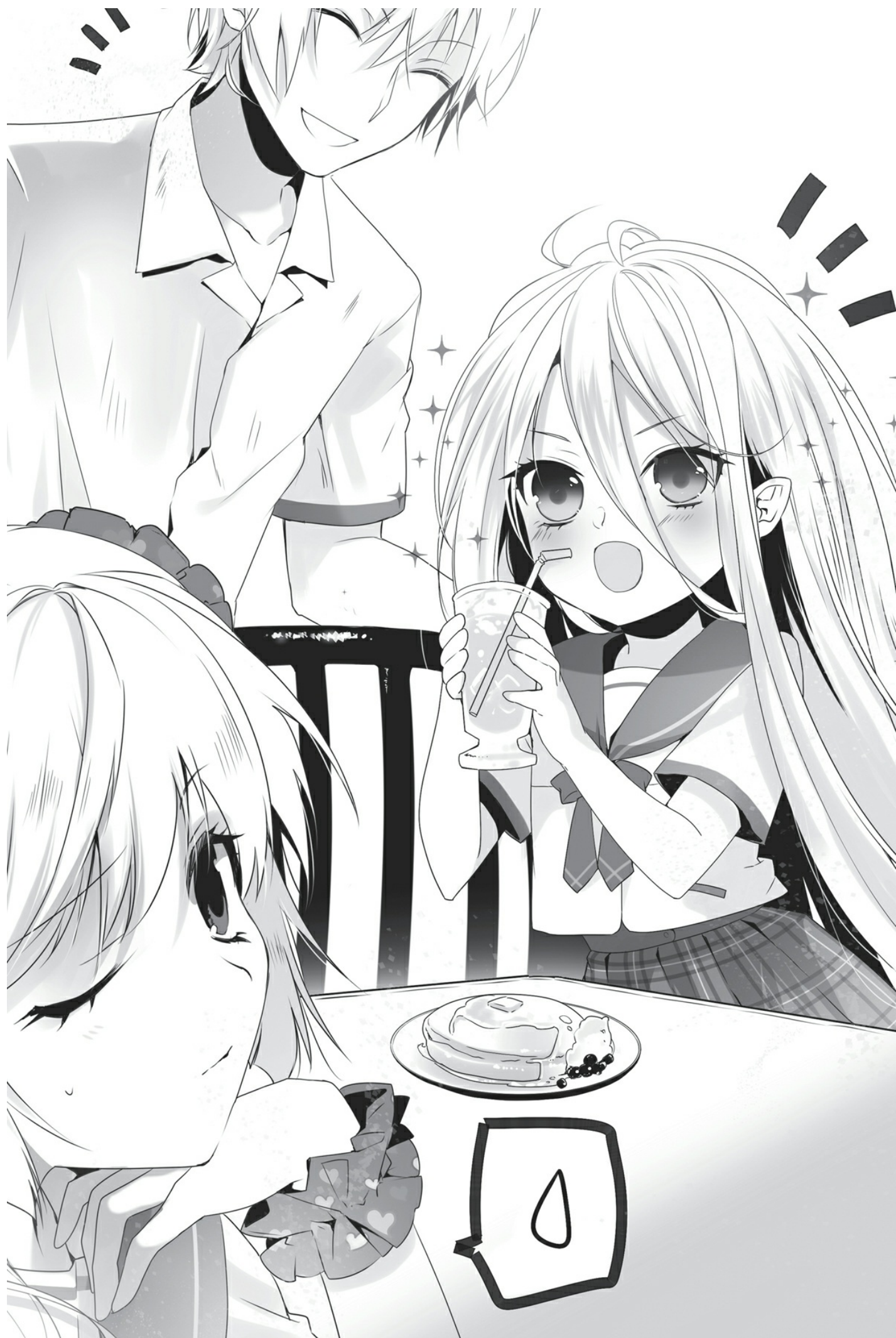
little unfair for her to be a vampire with looks like that. You'd seriously think she was a fairy."

Asagi reflexively soured and said, "B-but vampires age slowly, don't they?"

"That's true, but Kojou does have something of a sister complex."

"S-so he's really—?"

Asagi took Yaze's meaningful murmur at face value. It was a fact that Kojou doted on his little sister, probably because his parents were absent and Nagisa was sick. Rather than protective, it was probably more accurate to call him indulgent.



“Well, I understand how he feels. Nagisa’s cute, after all. Come to think of it, this Aurora girl feels a little like her. They’re about the same height, too.”

Asagi mumbled inaudibly to herself, furrowing her eyebrows at Yaze’s insensitive comment. He urgently waved a hand in her direction, perhaps picking up the negative energy she was radiating.

“Ah, er, I don’t mean to put you down in the dumps. After all, you beat her no contest on breast size. You’ll just have to pound into Kojou that when it comes to a girl’s tits, bigger is better.”

“Oh, shut up! I’m not in the dumps at all!” Asagi said and slapped the side of her childhood friend’s face. Of course, Aurora didn’t come close to Asagi when it came to style, but Asagi was still just a middle schooler. It wasn’t like she was a well-endowed woman, either.

“But that girl feels a little strange somehow, doesn’t she?” Asagi said, resting her chin in her palm as she gazed at Aurora’s profile.

“Yeah,” agreed Yaze.

“Kojou said she lost her memory?”

“Yeah, maybe that’s the reason why she feels a little off, like what’s on the inside and the outside don’t exactly match up. It’s like playing a retro video game from thirty years ago on a Gigafloat Management Corporation supercomputer.”

“...I don’t get the example you just used.”

“I’m just telling you it feels *weird*,” Asagi said, pursing her lips. Then she shifted her gaze back to Yaze as if suddenly remembering something. “Come to think of it, I hugged a lion cub at a zoo on the mainland, like, way back.”

“Aha.”

“So I was like, *it really is different from a cat*. The legs were much bigger and stuff.”

“That figures.”

Yaze didn’t seem terribly interested as he followed along. Asagi nodded to

herself.

“It does. In other words, this is like that.”

“It’s like what?!”

Yaze seemed out of sorts and drained of all his strength.

“Aww, geez. Fine, just forget it.”

Asagi, seeing that explaining was going to be a chore, vigorously waved him off.

“Come to think of it, Kojou said the girl might be the Fourth Primogenitor, didn’t he?”

“Yeah...the twelfth Kaleid Blood, he said.”

Asagi spoke apathetically. She acknowledged that Kojou had said that, but it didn’t look like she believed him whatsoever.

Certainly, Avrora looked a little different from the average vampire, but...

Yaze and Asagi murmured respectively:

“She doesn’t look the part.”

“...She totally doesn’t look the part.”

Having poured too much carbonated drink, Avrora, the subject of discussion, gazed dumbfounded at the bubbly overflow.

“K-Kojou! The bubbles know not where to cease swelling...!”

“Idiot, you put too much in! Don’t shake it! Don’t shake it!!”

Avrora looked close to tears as the bubbles poured over the edge of the glass. Asagi made a strained smile as she sighed once more.

“No way, right?”

## 4

The Fallen Dynasty was a vast, demon-ruled region in the Middle East, the Dominion ruled by Fallgazer, the Second Primogenitor.

Its total population was twenty-five million. It had its own independent

culture, a land unusually rich in alchemy and magic where demon beasts were domesticated. Thanks to trade with the east and west, it also had a thriving economy. On the other hand, tensions were high with the Sixty Great Nations of central Asia and the various cities of the Dark Continent, making it a land of precarious military balance.

Even though it was a Dominion—a demonic autonomous region—those with demonic blood in their veins did not amount to even 2 percent, and pureblood demons were fewer still. In spite of this, only demons with a high level of combat capability were recognized as having the right to rule, and these composed the majority of the empire's military might.

In the empire, all the castles where members of the royal family resided were military facilities garrisoned by army units heavily reinforced with cutting-edge gear. The home castle of Iblisveil Aziz, Fifth Crown Prince of the Fallen Dynasty, was one of these military fortresses. It was a particularly crucial strategic fortress in the Caucasus region, close to the border with the Warlord's Empire. The difficult terrain made moving large numbers of troops rather difficult, so smaller numbers of stout, highly trained soldiers were used in their stead.

It was on a snowy December night that this Caucasus fortress sustained a surprise attack.

"How noisy. What is it, Grandpa?"

Iblisveil was gazing at a chessboard in his sleeping quarters when he shot a gaze of displeasure toward the aged vampire that had come rushing in.

The giant fortress rocked dully from repeated explosions.

"An enemy attack, Your Highness. The western gate has been destroyed."

"It doesn't appear to be an invasion by the Warlord's army... What, did my incorrigible elder sister hire mercenaries from some place?"

"My apologies. 'Twas our intention to keep track of the movements of other royals, but..."

As the aged vampire bowed his head, Iblisveil crushed the chess pawn in his hands and laughed. To royals such as Iblisveil, the greater menace was not from the armies of other nations but his own royal relatives. In the past, various

intrigues had been set upon Iblisveil, and in turn he had wrecked each one. It was natural for him to think that one of his siblings had probably dispatched assassins against him this time as well. However...

“Mmm. Certainly, such a clumsy bombing is not the way of my elder sister, Kishal... Any movement from forces on the Red Sea front?”

“No, nothing in particular.”

“I see. Very well. Either way, my elder brothers in Kharkoum do not have the courage to come and attempt to kill me. That being the case, I have another suspect in mind.”

“Who might that be, Your Highness?”

“I shall go greet our guests. I must show them proper courtesy.”

Iblisveil covered himself in an extravagant crimson robe and headed toward the throne room.

The interior of the castle was boisterous from ceaseless gunfire and sounds of explosions. He wondered if a Beast Vassal had been summoned. The overflow of demonic energy had affected the color of the sky. Amid that, he sensed a single source of vast, off-the-scale demonic power from a mighty being running wild that rivaled the Beast Vassals of the royals themselves.

Realizing that the corridors of the castle had been destroyed, the aged vampire who had been addressed as Grandpa shouted:

“—The castle has been breached?! What are the Royal Guards doing?!”

With a great roar, a stone pillar supporting the ceiling collapsed, shrouding the throne room in dust. Iblisveil surveyed it all from the top of a multitiered platform.

Iblisveil’s eyes glowed crimson as he quietly stated, “Fall back, Grandpa.”

“Your Highness?! But—”

The aged vampire looked back in bewilderment.

A moment later, the thick, metal doors were wrecked, and uninvited guests poured in.



The intruders numbered fewer than ten. Each of the soldiers was dressed in black, wearing masks with animal-skull motifs. They were escorting a tall, slender man and a small-statured girl with her face hidden by a hood—and that was all.

“Nosferatu...?! The Nelapsi Liberation Army?!” the aged vampire exclaimed. He glared at the black-clothed men.

Nelapsi was an emergent ghoulish territory that had not been internationally recognized as a proper nation itself. Though they were not in a direct state of war with the Fallen Dynasty, all proper vampire clans held deep disgust toward the violent and militaristic Nosferatu. The aged vampire’s veins bulged from his temple; no doubt he was livid at the humiliating fact that their ilk had breached the gates.

The tall man spoke in a courteous tone that did not suit a raider.

“Your Highness, Prince Iblisveil Aziz, please forgive this sudden visit. I, Balthazar Zaharias, tremble in delight at the honor of an audience with you this evening.”

A ferocious smile came over Iblisveil, standing on the platform as he looked down.

“So it was you, Zaharias. You’ve got some nerve, coming before me in the company of filthy Nosferatu. Do you love hell that much, arms dealer?”

“I shall repay you in some way for my rudeness in due time. However, as there is business between us, I ask that you first listen to my request.”

“A lowly arms dealer has business with the likes of me, you say?”

Iblisveil hmphed at Zaharias’s impudent words and smiled, baring his fangs.

“Interesting. I shall honor your foolhardiness and at least hear you out. Speak.”

“To get right to the point... I would like for you to hand over the Fallen Dynasty’s Kaleid Bloods under your administration, namely, Hebdomos and Hendekatos.”

“Hmph... For an upstart, you’ve certainly done your homework,” Iblisveil

murmured in apparent admiration. Those were the two Kaleid Bloods in the care of the Fallen Dynasty. The fact that Iblisveil administered them was top secret, known only to the primogenitor and a few select ministers.

“However, wishes above your station shall lead to your ruin, weapons broker. You should depart from my land this very moment. Or would you like to try robbing the dolls from me by force?”

“If Your Highness wishes it...” Zaharias’s lips curled up in a smile. His insolence sent the aged vampire into a rage.

“You savage!”

The aged vampire’s white hair became disheveled as he began to summon his Beast Vassal. Noticing this, Iblisveil immediately tried to stop him. But before he could, the older vampire’s body burst apart, with nary a trace remaining. It was as if his flesh had been shot with a giant magic bullet.

“Grandpa!”

The aftershock of the attack cracked the castle walls. Zaharias calmly and sadly gazed at the sight. *Tragic, but the old vampire raised a hand first, so it was proper self-defense*, it seemed to say.

Falling pieces of rubble bounced off Iblisveil as he roared, “You scum! So you want an early death that much! Pulverize them, Duamutef—!”

Demonic energy gushed out of Iblisveil’s diminutive body on an incredible scale. The power made the air shudder as he summoned a giant Beast Vassal from nothing. A snarling golden jackal appeared.

The Beast Vassals of royals like Iblisveil wielded enough destructive might to sink a huge warship in a single blow or wipe this entire fortress off the map. Normally, it was not the Beast Vassal one called to take on a single opponent. In doing so, he no doubt intended to erase Zaharias from the world, leaving not even a single shred of flesh behind. The beast transformed into a huge, sublime, glimmering beam and moved to mow down Zaharias and the others.

But the golden Beast Vassal’s attack did not singe a single hair on the weapons merchant’s body.

It was as if an invisible wall had appeared to shield Zaharias. A powerful barrier of vibrations and shock waves had impeded the Beast Vassal's attack.

Iblisveil's expression grew graver still.

"...Enatos! So she is the basis of your confidence, Zaharias?!"

The small girl with Zaharias pulled back her hood and revealed her face. She was a girl with blond hair that billowed like a flame and eyes like a glimmering blaze. The protective suit she wore was unceremoniously marked with a roman numeral *ix* as if it was the designation of a weapon.

"You fool! Do you think a mere prototype is a match for me?! Hapi! Qebehsenuel! Smash him and his conceit to pieces!"

Thus, Iblisveil summoned two new Beast Vassals.

Kaleid Bloods like Enatos were said to be able to summon Beast Vassals on par with those of the Fourth Primogenitor. Certainly, with such power on hand, fewer than ten people could pull off an attack on a fortress of that scale.

However, the Beast Vassals of Iblisveil, a prince directly descended from the Second Primogenitor, boasted demonic power of a different scale than a normal vampire's—and he had three of them. That was more than enough power to overwhelm a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor proper, let alone a mere incomplete prototype. Zaharias's plan had failed to fully account for Iblisveil's power.

"Ha-ha. That will not do, Your Highness. That will not do at all."

But Zaharias broadened his arms and laughed with a look of composed confidence. Two girls walked out from behind him. They wore the same face as Enatos. The markings engraved on their protective suits were *ii* and *viii*—

"Merchants have no pride. They must perpetually adapt to seize business opportunities, like so—"

"Kaleid Bloods?! Deutra and Ogdoos...?!"

Iblisveil's face contorted in shock. Enatos had not been the only prototype under Zaharias's control. He wondered if Zaharias had quietly bought up Kaleid Bloods over the course of several decades. Perhaps had simply seized them, like

he had done in the past when he invaded the Duchy of Caruana and took Enatos, sealed therein.

And now, he was trying to obtain more prototypes, even at the cost of earning the Fallen Dynasty as his enemy.

“Zaharias, surely your objective cannot be—?!”

Deutra’s and Ogdoos’s newly summoned Beast Vassals blew away Iblisveil’s three, and the torrent of incredible demonic energy flooded into Iblisveil’s small body as well. Half of his home castle was enveloped in the process, annihilating it without a trace.

The giant fortress had begun to collapse.

The stone walls hissed as they melted, with the remnants of demonic energy turning into a hot, wild gale.

None would think that anyone could survive such an attack. However, even so, Zaharias made a small sigh of apparent regret.

“Mmm, it seems that he was not finished off. Such is a prince directly descended from Fallgazer... However, now I have *six*. Preparations for the banquet shall not be long in coming.”

Beneath the fortress, annihilated by the Beast Vassals’ attacks, two girls lay side by side, unharmed. They were blond vampires with the same faces as Enatos and the others—prototypes of the Fourth Primogenitor.

Laughing softly, Zaharias quietly commanded the Nosferatu to retrieve the girls. As he did so, the three Kaleid Bloods dressed in protective suits gazed at Zaharias, their eyes unmoved.

## 5

Nagisa, who returned to club activities on the last Sunday of winter break, had an appointment.

She wore her street clothes with her black hair tied up and stood in front of the train station, which still contained a slightly festive mood from New Year’s, next to a bronze horse sculpture illuminated by the rays of the setting sun.

“Kojou, hey, hey. Over here, over heeere!”

Nagisa, buffeted by the human wave of people returning home, jumped up and down as she waved to Kojou. Her clothes—a coat, scarf, and black tights—were considered heavy clothing on the tropical Itogami Island, even in the middle of winter. Kojou waved back.

“Heya, sorry I’m a little late.”

“You’re more than a *little* late! We were supposed to meet at five o’clock. It’s twenty-five minutes past. Thanks to that, I got mistaken for a runaway and flirted with twice!”

Kojou took a long, hard look at Nagisa’s petite figure, which could have belonged to a primary school student, and asked, “...Flirt? With you?”

Seeing the blunt surprise in Kojou’s posture, Nagisa whacked him with her big traveling bag.

“What’s with the doubting look?! Grrr!”

“I’m sorry already. Anyway, you probably got mistaken for a runaway because you have that big bag on you.”

“Well, you’re the one who kept saying I needed to dress warm. Are *you* okay in the thin stuff you’re wearing? It gets cold at night, especially at the harbor.”

“Ahh, yeah. I’ll manage somehow.” Kojou, dressed only in a thin parka, shrugged his shoulders slightly.

Nagisa surveyed the area before cocking her head to the side.

“Huh. Come to think of it, what about Asagi and Yaze? Weren’t they coming today?”

“They’re heading straight to the marina. They said they’d pay for dinner and everything.”

“That so. This’ll be fun. I didn’t have a chance to go out at night when I was in the hospital.”

“Stargazing seems a little different than ‘going out at night,’ just sayin’...”

“Ah, really? Why’s that?”

Nagisa smiled happily as she spoke, dragging a grin out of Kojou in the process. It certainly felt like a long time since he'd taken Nagisa somewhere.

Lately, she had seemed unusually energetic, perhaps as a result of Avrora's seal being broken. She hadn't fallen ill or been bedridden at all, and she'd even started participating in the cheerleading club, even if her involvement was really just watching and learning.

According to Tooyama's explanation, though, his sister's physical recovery wasn't entirely complete. After all, her priestess abilities still hadn't returned. Nagisa was still possessed by Avrora's personality.

Gajou and Mimori were searching for a way to treat her, but so far they didn't have much to show for results. Even so, the stabilization of Nagisa's physical condition gave them some breathing room. Hence, why they'd decided against trying any shock therapy.

"It's been seventeen years since people could see a meteor shower at this time of year, huh?" Nagisa wondered aloud.

"Yeah. Supposedly it's because of something-or-other comet cutting across the solar system. The E... E..."

"The Erigeneia Comet."

"Yeah, that one."

Nagisa threw her head back in exasperation as Kojou applied his half-forgotten knowledge to the conversation.

Truly, Kojou was not well-versed on celestial bodies. Going to see a meteor shower was just an excuse, separate from his real goal.

"Let's go, then. Wait, why did Asagi and Yaze go ahead of us to the marina, anyway?"

"Hold on, Nagisa. There's someone I want you to meet first."

"Huh?"

Nagisa was just about to walk off when Kojou stopped her. Then, he motioned to a blond girl who'd been waiting around at a slightly removed place. Avrora, hiding in the shadow of a post, timidly poked her face out and began

walking toward Kojou and Nagisa with a nervous look.

“Who’s that?”

Nagisa gazed emotionlessly at the sight of Avrora as she made a small murmur. Her voice seemed hard, like she wasn’t the usual, sociable Nagisa. Avrora, sensitive to the aura of rejection, immediately halted.

“Now, now, Nagisa. Her name is Avrora.” Kojou, thrown off by their unexpected reactions, earnestly tried to smooth things over.

To completely heal Nagisa, he had to peel off the Avrora personality possessing her. The most reliable method for that was having Avrora herself accept that personality inside her. Once Avrora fully regained her knowledge and abilities as a vampire, she’d be completely protected against Zaharias’s machinations.

Getting Avrora and Nagisa to meet face-to-face was a calculated risk.

If things went well, their meeting might merge the personalities together in one shot, but it was just as possible that Nagisa’s physical condition would deteriorate. Even worse, it’d be no joke if Avrora’s demonic energy started running amok.

He’d meant to wait until Nagisa’s physical condition had stabilized and take both girls to an open-air location to minimize the dangers. However, Kojou naturally hadn’t counted on Nagisa so vehemently rejecting Avrora.

“.....Vampire...”

Nagisa kept a glare fixed at Avrora and nervously backed away. Her face held neither hatred nor disgust, but pure fear. Ever since the incident three years earlier, Nagisa was deeply afraid of all demons. She had post-traumatic demonophobia.

“Well, she is, but I wanted you to at least meet her one ti—”

“Stay back!”

Avrora’s feet were rooted to the spot even before Nagisa’s angry shout.

Kojou ground his teeth as he realized just how reckless he had been. He’d thought that Nagisa wouldn’t see what Avrora really was right away due to her

lack of a demon registration bracelet, but he'd assumed wrong. Even if Nagisa had lost her spiritual abilities, she was still a priestess. Apparently, she had realized Avrora's true nature in a single moment from subtle differences other people wouldn't normally notice.

Even so, Avrora really looked like a fairy. It was impossible to pass her off as a normal human to begin with.

"Don't come close! Stay away! Go, get off this island! Now!"

"Hey, don't talk to people like th—"

Kojou stretched a hand toward Nagisa. She violently brushed it aside and turned toward the station.

"I'm going home."

"Nagisa!"

When his little sister broke into a sprint, Kojou hastily tried to follow suit, but he heard someone running off behind him—Avrora. Nagisa's thoughtless words had thrown her into a panic, making her impulsively dash off.

"—Hey, Avrora! Aw crap, why is this... Avrora, wait!"

After a brief moment of hesitation, Kojou reluctantly went after Avrora. Nagisa was heading home at least, so he judged Avrora's aimless running off to be the more dangerous issue. Avrora, unfamiliar with Itogami Island's geography, would get lost for sure if Kojou let her go.

Watching Kojou and Avrora head off, Nagisa silently pressed a hand to her chest.

"..."

Her heart was fiercely pumping blood through her veins; her breathing had grown ragged. Cold sweat poured from her entire body. She could tell that a great force was raging wildly within her body—one that even she could not control. Nagisa had not distanced herself from Avrora out of her fear of demons alone.

"No, Kojou." Nagisa continued to have difficulty breathing as she murmured, "If you make me meet that girl, it will mean the end of everything..."



Her voice disappeared into the twilight hustle and bustle, never to reach anyone's ears.

## 6

Itogami Island, home to numerous nocturnal vampires, had many facilities and eateries open until late at night. On the other hand, as a solitary island floating on the Pacific Ocean, there were no sources of artificial lighting in the island's vicinity; nor were there any skyscrapers to obstruct one's field of vision. As a platform for stargazing, one might call it a blessed environment.

In particular, the area around the marina Kojou and Aurora used as their home base was dark, with a sky full of stars spread over their heads. Even stargazing amateurs like them could easily make out the constellations.

The clear, night sky was like a deep sea as pale meteorites streaked across it, little by little.

Even while looking up at such an exquisite sight, Aurora's expression was dark. No doubt she'd never expected Nagisa to reject her like that.

"You all right, Aurora?"

Kojou called to the girl as he brought cup noodles over for supper.

"Hey...don't worry about Nagisa. It's not that she hates you or anything. She's just scared of demons. I think it's probably a subconscious fear from the terrorist attack. It's my fault for not properly explaining things."

"...'Tis my fault for adding to her suffering."

Aurora was still on the boat's deck, hands wrapped around her knees, eyes heavy as she murmured in self-deprecation. In spite of the loss of her own memories, she seemed awfully quick to feel responsible for things.

"I'm telling you, it ain't your fault. Here, eat already."

Kojou pulled the lid off the fully prepared noodles and slid them in front of Aurora.

Even while down in the dumps, the scent got Aurora's attention, and she raised her head bit by bit. She took chopsticks from Kojou and began to slurp

the white, steamy ramen.

“Delicious.”

“Sure is.”

Kojou breathed a sigh of relief as he finally saw Avrora smile a little. That was when a human silhouette rose up in Kojou’s blind spot like a vengeful spirit. There stood Asagi, furrowing her brows in obvious displeasure.

“...What do you two think you’re doing?”

“Whoa?!”

Asagi was wringing her stargazing binoculars with a force that threatened to pulverize them as she looked down at Kojou and Avrora sitting close.

“What, are you going to make her go ‘aah,’ too? How indecent. Are you a couple?!”

“What, you want some, too? Here.”

Kojou sighed in obvious exasperation as he offered a cup noodle container to Asagi. She apparently hadn’t expected that reaction from Kojou.

“Er, ah... Well, if you insist, I suppose I have to eat it, but...,” she murmured haltingly as she summoned her courage, opening her mouth and waiting in an *aah* pose. However, she only heard *ooh*’s from Kojou and Avrora as they looked up at the night sky.

“That’s a big swarm, huh. That was definitely a meteor that time, not a plane.”

“The falling stars twinkle so fleetingly...!”

“Hey, don’t ignore me, you! Pay a little more attention to me, darn it!!”

Indignant, Asagi grabbed the cup noodles out of Kojou’s hand and began consuming them in a single breath. Kojou, who’d been watching as the numbers of meteorites waned, yelped aloud, having not yet eaten a single bite. Avrora simply squirmed in place, apparently finding the boisterous scene oddly amusing.

“Geez. You’re all little brats.”

Yaze, lying down on a corner of the pier, smiled weakly as he looked up at Kojou and Asagi making a fuss on the boat.

He grunted as he sat up and shifted his gaze to a young woman who was standing on the wall of rocks next to the pier. She was a brown-haired vampiress, wearing a coat over a maid outfit. She bit her lip as she gazed at Avrora's innocent excitement.

"Heya, Vel. Back, huh? Finished the part-time work, then?"

Yaze grunted with effort as he rose to his feet with a frivolous smile and approached Veldiana.

"Yes..."

Veldiana smiled weakly as she made a perfunctory nod. Yaze raised an eyebrow.

"Ohhh, what's wrong? You look tired. Usually you're in such high spirits when you're doin' the waitress thing."

"I am not in *high spirits*! I am forced to do that to get by, no more!"

Veldiana glared back, fangs bared. Yaze laughed out loud as she finally returned to her normal self.

"Avrora doesn't seem very happy. Did something happen?" she whispered.

*Surprisingly sharp*, thought Yaze as he blinked in visible admiration.

"Yeah, Kojou tried to get Av to meet Nagisa."

"Gajou's daughter?!" Veldiana's eyes went wide as she drew close to Yaze. "What happened?! Did Dodekatos's memory return?!"

"Nah. When she got close to Nagisa, Nagisa got pissed, and that's why Av's in the dumps." Yaze bluntly shook his head.

Veldiana's fingers, gripping his shirt, slowly loosened.

"It didn't work? No, why not...?!"

Yaze sighed deeply and asked in a tone used to speak to little children, "...Hey, Vel. Do you really need to force Av to get her memories back? Thanks to Zaharias's raid on Prince Iblisveil, the Nelapsi Autonomous Region's in a state of

war with the Fallen Dynasty. They don't have any time for the Blazing Banquet, either. Nelapsi was on the Warlord's Empire's bad side to begin with, and they put a big price on Zaharias's head. He'll destroy himself soon enough. Someone else'll carry out your revenge."

"...So I should just sit back and watch...?" Veldiana asked with a dim glint in her eye.

Yaze laughed casually and irresponsibly. "Living here ain't so bad, is it? This Av likes you a lot. Isn't it good she gets to know other people, too? Something about that make you unhappy?"

"..."

Veldiana's throat twitched. Her reaction indicated she wanted to say something in rebuttal but could not. Yaze paid her no heed and continued.

"Well, it's a lot tougher living poor instead of living at a castle, but from what I hear, your sister wasn't the type to want people to avenge her to begin with."

"I...know that...!"

Veldiana rasped in a quivering voice. For Yaze's part, her quick concession elicited a conflicted look from him.

"Vel?"

"I understood without you having to tell me. Yes, it's true. I do not mind living in the Demon Sanctuary. Soon enough I could manage it without complaint. As for Aurora, I think of her as family. Sometimes I feel like I'm happy here!"

"Then you don't need to—"

"That is *why* I must!"

Veldiana's expression was as unsteady as a little girl's as she forcefully shook her head.

"That is why I must not forget my revenge! If I of all people forget the theft of my family's name and lands, living happily in this foreign land, I can never excuse myself to my sister. Just be silent already. What do you understand about that?!"

“...I suppose. You have a point and all.”

Yaze sighed. Veldiana didn't know it, but he understood how she felt. Yaze lived contrary to his own wishes, bound just as much by thoughts of family and name as she was. It wasn't as if Yaze was monitoring his best friend because he liked it.

“But you need to lay off the drugs. Lately, even Demon Sanctuaries have had a lot of problems with addicts on that stuff. It'll run even a high-ranking vampire like you ragged.”

Yaze spoke nonchalantly as he pointed to the arm Veldiana was keeping hidden under her coat.

Veldiana's body froze, her expression that of a child being scolded. However, Yaze said nothing more. He kept his back turned to Veldiana as he waved before heading toward Kojou and the others, still enjoying themselves on the boat.

“I know that,” she murmured, watching Yaze go.

Without a sound, the stars flowed downward against the backdrop of the wintery night sky.

## 7

The Nelapsi Autonomous Government was a parliamentary organization comprised of the chief ghoulish clans occupying part of Thracia in Eastern Europe. Yet this was nothing but a front. The ghoulish clans had such deep antipathy toward one another that they would immediately dissolve such an “autonomous government,” save for its chairman, Balthazar Zaharias. In the end, it was a fragile organization held together by the existence of Zaharias himself.

Nor could Zaharias's own position be said to be rock solid, for he was not a ghoul, but an outsider. The Nosferatu obeyed him for no reason beyond their acknowledgment of the value of the weapons he, a simple arms broker, provided.

Even so, one might say the arrangement had worked out rather well to date. With Zaharias's backing, the Nosferatu had obtained the military might to defy

the Warlord's Empire. And they had conquered the Duchy of Caruana, a territory they had greatly desired.

Yet, that equilibrium had gently begun to collapse. And the cause was none other than Zaharias's own actions—

"20:25 hours, zero seconds— Count Zaharias, it is the appointed time."

One of the ghoulish clan chieftains was visiting Zaharias's mansion.

The black outfit he wore was the Nosferatu combat uniform. Behind the antagonistic figure stood soldiers dressed in the same black clothing. The atmosphere was explosive; they could train their guns on Zaharias at any moment.

"My, Colonel Zwickel. Ah, someone did mention you wanted to speak to me in person."

Zaharias remained seated at his desk, calmly greeting them all by himself. There was not the slightest hint of fear or nervousness on his face. The ghoulish chieftain found this incomprehensible as he opened his mouth.

"I have a question, Count Zaharias."

"Ask away. It concerns the raid on Prince Iblisveil, yes?"

"It does."

Zwickel nodded gravely as he scowled at Zaharias.

"Earlier, at 18:12 hours, twenty-seven seconds, the International Safety Preservation Council voted that Nelapsi would be punished. The vote was unanimous. Each Dominion is on the move in accordance with this."

"I see."

"Why did you provoke a war with the Fallen Dynasty? Furthermore, you did so without permission from Parliament. We are already diplomatically isolated thanks to the fierce border clashes with the Warlord's Empire. We have already gained autonomy for Nelapsi. We cannot afford to lose it again."

"I see. It is very natural for you to doubt me."

Zwickel's questions were dripping with enmity, but Zaharias readily accepted

them. Indeed, his narrow, sly-looking eyes squinted further in amusement.

“And what would you have me do about it?”

“...Return the Kaleid Bloods you seized from Iblisveil.”

“Why?”

“We do not require them.”

“In other words, bow our heads to the Fallen Dynasty and beg forgiveness? But do you really think such a deal can be achieved at this late stage?”

Zaharias inquired with a sober expression. That was when, for the first time, a smile came over Zwickel’s lips. It was the cold expression of pity reserved for those soon to pass from the mortal coil.

“It can, for we will add your head to the deal.”

As Zwickel finished speaking, ferocious gunshots rang out. Zwickel’s bare flesh ruptured, and a gun barrel protruded from his wrist. He had used the gun embedded in his own flesh to shoot Zaharias.

The bullet scored a direct hit on Zaharias’s face, sending half of his head flying. There was no need to check his pulse to know he had died instantly. Zaharias was a human, not a demon. Even had he been a demon, he surely would not have survived such a wound.

Zwickel turned to his subordinates.

“20:19 hours, eight seconds— Former Chairman Zaharias executed. Commencing search for Kaleid Bloods concealed by Zaharias.”

The Nosferatu in black outfits dispersed in an organized fashion, spreading throughout the mansion. Zaharias had bastions spread throughout the world, but he’d never let his precious Kaleid Bloods out of his grasp. They had to be somewhere in the mansion.

“I must thank you, Zaharias. The money and weapons you provided allowed us Nosferatu who lack Beast Vassals to defy the Warlord’s Empire. However, the situation has changed.”

Zwickel gazed at Zaharias’s corpse as he quietly chided it.

Nelapsi had already gained its autonomy. It was now time to think about protecting it. Their history as pillagers was already at an end. Moreover, a weapons broker like Zaharias could not live in a place without war. They were fated to have a falling-out one day.

“Colonel, we have confirmed that the dolls are here.”

Finally, one of his subordinates returned to report that the Kaleid Bloods had been found. *Roger that*, Zwickel indicated with a nod. He left Zaharias’s corpse behind as he headed off.

The Kaleid Bloods were in an underground vault. He had expected as much, but their treatment had not been courteous whatsoever. They’d been sedated, placed in casket-like containers, and otherwise neglected. There were twelve cases in total—but half were empty.

“20:25 hours, forty seconds— Kaleid Bloods secured in dormant state. Total of six... Hendekatos, Enatos, Ogdoos, Hebdomos, Deutra...and is this Protte?”

Zwickel scowled slightly. Yet, the final one, Protte, was wearing a torn and tattered dress. Even now, he could see a faint red scar underneath a tear in the clothing over her chest.

It was a large scar, as if someone had plucked a rib right out of her.

“Colonel, over here!”

Zwickel was bewildered when one of his subordinates called to him.

The subordinate was pointing at a seventh girl. But this was no Kaleid Blood. She was a young thing with dull, gray hair, in ornate clothing. He could not see any blatant external injury, but it was clear at a glance that she had already passed away. She had probably died from illness, or perhaps debilitation.

She was inside a crystal gemstone resembling a diamond, some six or seven meters in diameter.

“Why is...a human girl...?”

Zwickel judiciously surveyed the area as he approached the transparent crystal. Then, when he reached out to touch the surface of the crystal with his hand—



“Don’t touch that!”

Zwickel was rudely interrupted by an angry, masculine shout. Zwickel turned toward the familiar voice—Zaharias’s—in complete shock.

A tall, slender man wearing a blood-soaked suit was standing at the gloomy entrance to the basement.

“So you have...seen it...”

The man spoke in Zaharias’s voice. Zwickel’s subordinates drew the blades embedded inside their own bodies, but they did not move. They seemed to be unsure as to whether they ought to attack.

“22:28 hours, twelve seconds— Zaharias confirmed alive... No, that face is...”

Zwickel exclaimed as he glared at the slender man’s face.

The man was the same height as Zaharias. The clothes were the same ones Zaharias had worn. However, the face was completely different. This visage was far younger than Zaharias’s, less than half his apparent age. But he had faint traces of Zaharias’s facial features.

“Ahh, this? My, my, after so much damage, I must have the plastic surgery re-done. After all, anyone would sneer at someone trying to do business with this young face.”

The tall, slender man patted a blood-stained cheek as he made a strained smile. His manner of speaking was Zaharias’s through and through. Zwickel had blown away his face, but it had regained its form with a younger appearance.

“Vampire?! No, a Blood Servant—!”

Zwickel exclaimed as he finally realized what the man really was. Zaharias was not a normal human. He was a pseudo-vampire, a Blood Servant granted eternal life by a vampire.

“You are correct, Colonel Zwickel. The weapons I furnished your Nosferatu with were developed for my own use to start with.”

As Zaharias spoke, countless blades embedded in his own body emerged. As a Blood Servant with regenerative ability on par with a vampire, he could employ the same weapons as the Nosferatu.

Yet, Zaharias's healing power, able to regenerate even a head that had been blown away, demonstrated that his master was no normal vampire. Zaharias's master was either a primogenitor who had been cursed with immortality by the very gods, or a being wielding power on par with them. His combat capability likely surpassed that of Zwickel's ghoul soldiers.

"22:29 hours, thirty-two seconds— Commencing combat with Zaharias. Even with identical equipment, he has no chance against this numerical disparity. Overwhelm him!"

Obedying Zwickel's command, the subordinates in black outfits fanned in a circle around Zaharias. However, his entire body shook as he laughed in delight.

"Oho, did you just say my equipment is *identical* to yours?"

"Tch—get him!!"

Zwickel shot at Zaharias. Simultaneously, his subordinates rushed the target with their blades. Just like the ones they had used on Kojou, these slicing attacks were imbued with incandescent fire via demonic energy.

But before they made contact with Zaharias's body, they were obstructed by a clear crystal gemstone. It was a titanic bighorn sheep with flesh of diamond—a Beast Vassal, appearing out of thin air to protect Zaharias. Its surge of incredible demonic energy made the very earth shudder and cry out. The air grew denser and more stifling, impeding the Nosferatu's movements.

"The Unstained and Unerring Divine Sheep, Agnus Dei?! Protte's Beast Vassal?! Zaharias, you cannot possibly be...!"

"I see you've finally realized."

As Zwickel shouted and looked back in shock, the young man wore a ferocious smile. The diamond crystal bellowed as it scattered translucent shards. Twitching, the soldiers in black outfits were sent flying. The scale of destruction was on a wholly different level. This was no longer combat; it was a one-sided slaughter.

Zaharias calmly stated:

"Yes. I am *the Fourth Primogenitor's Blood Servant*."

Yet no one was around any longer to hear. Zwickel and his subordinates had been annihilated by the huge Beast Vassal's attack, with nothing remaining that was remotely humanoid. All that was left in the subterranean chamber were Zaharias, the six Kaleid Bloods, and the human girl's corpse.

"Now, then...the preliminaries have been delayed somewhat, but it's nothing that cannot be rectified."

Zaharias released the Beast Vassal from its summons as he approached Protte, still asleep.

Then, he reverently knelt on one knee, stating with a glint of madness in his eyes:

"Let us begin the final preparations for the banquet...my master."

## 8

That day, it rained on Itogami Island.

It was spring rain as soft as fine silk; gentle, warm April showers.

Kojou was returning to the marina on his way back from school. When he noticed a small silhouette standing still atop the pier, he broke into a run. The vampire girl, wearing a white summer dress, was watching Kojou without an umbrella. The scene was mysterious somehow, making her seem like some sort of pious nun.

"Avrora! What the hell are you doing?! You're soaking wet!"

Unnerved, Kojou rushed over to Avrora, leading her by her cold hand onto the boat.

"D-do you bid me to spend my time in idleness and obscurity, servant?"

Kojou's visible display of anger made Avrora's shoulders twitch and tighten, but even so, she replied with upturned eyes for once. Apparently, she seemed to be saying, *I've been waiting for you*. She remained like that as Kojou vigorously dried her hair with a towel.

"...Wait, were you waiting for me the whole time?"

"I-I thought that you might not come today," Avrora whimpered in a frail

voice that was nearly inaudible.

She must have been more than a little uneasy, thinking that he might abandon her. Kojou didn't even want to think about what would have happened if he hadn't come at all.

Even then, almost half a year since meeting Aurora, her personality hadn't changed on that point at all. She'd become rather accustomed to life on Itogami Island in every other respect, though.

"I told you, didn't I? The new term's starting up. Spring break's over already."

Kojou explained while indicating for Aurora, still soaked, to go change her clothes. Aurora was headed into the cabin when she looked back with a somewhat frightened look.

"N-new...term?"

"New school term. It's a lot of trouble moving up to high school. There's trial exams and guidance counseling and stuff—" Kojou sluggishly aired his complaints when he suddenly remembered something. "Oh yeah," he said, changing the topic. "Come to think of it, Yaze asked me, but...do you wanna go to school?"

"...School?"

Aurora, changing her clothes on the other side of the partition, poked her head out.

"Yeah," said Kojou with a nod.

"There're still a few annoying formalities left, but it looks like they're gonna accept the DNA sample you handed over for demon registration a while back. You can attend school once they do. I'm not sure if you could attend the same one I'm going to, though."

"—I...I want to go to the same school as you, Kojou!"

Still wearing nothing but her underwear, Aurora leaped out with a very excited look on her face. "Whoa!" Kojou said, in danger of spurting blood from his nose as he averted his eyes from the earnest-looking girl.

"Guess I'll have to ask Natsuki, then. I don't really like owing her favors, but..."

“V-very well!”

Avrora’s expression brightened as she resumed changing. From the looks of things, Kojou had the sinking feeling that her going to school would add to his mental stress.

“Vel’s coming back from work late today. Let’s go out for food with her. What do you wanna eat?”

Kojou posed the question once Avrora finally finished changing. It bugged him that she’d put on her T-shirt backward, but pointing that out would be troublesome, so he kept his comments to himself.

“...Wh-what about Nagisa?” Avrora asked timidly, apparently concerned for the girl.

Kojou usually ate Nagisa’s cooking at home. Hence, it wasn’t often that Kojou ate with Avrora.

If the two girls could get along, they’d no doubt be eating meals together, but after seeing how Nagisa had behaved, he hadn’t even thought about putting her and Avrora together face-to-face again.

In the first place, it wouldn’t have been strange for Nagisa to chew Kojou out for meeting Avrora at all. Kojou thought that guilt must have prevented her from doing so.

“She’s at the hospital today. The usual tests,” Kojou replied.

Despite hearing his easygoing tone, Avrora lowered her eyes in visible dismay. She still felt responsible for Nagisa’s continuing poor physical condition, attributing it to her memories not having returned.

“I keep telling you, you don’t need to worry about it. More to the point, is there something you wanna eat?”

Kojou smiled as he asked. Avrora gasped as she thought of something and leaned forward with a sparkle in her eyes. She looked him straight in the eye with a dazzling smile.

“F-frozen droplets of Nirvana!”

“You mean ice cream...? Well, fine. It’s a little early for supper anyway. Is

Lulu's fine?"

"I-I permit it."

Standing tall, Avrora huffed through her nose. Kojou smiled thinly at her as they left the boat. She really did seem accustomed to life on the island.

Lulu's was a franchise with locations dotting every part of Itogami Island. The stuff was also available for purchase at certain convenience chains, but there was a small stand near the marina. Avrora stubbornly kept most of her desires below the surface, but her infatuation with sugary things, ice cream in particular, was an exception to this rule. Even while walking normally with her, it was obvious when ice cream was on her mind.

But when they came within sight of the ice cream stand sign, Avrora abruptly halted.

"...Avrora?"

Kojou looked at her in surprise. Her blue eyes, usually so timid, held clear enmity in them. She stared at a small figure, a blond girl in a gray protective suit. The suit's shoulders had IX markings printed onto them.

"You're...Enatos...?!"

"So you remembered my name, Kojou Akatsuki. I praise you for this."

The blond girl with the same face as Avrora addressed him with a haughty tone. Unlike Avrora, who seemed so hesitant, she had a serious chip on her shoulder.

"Alone, huh? Why come here out of the blue?" Kojou asked, mildly annoyed.

He did not forget to keep his guard up for Zaharias and his goons. Enatos herself may not have been Avrora's enemy, but she was a dangerous being nonetheless. He'd never forgotten the damage from her loss of control on the night they had first met.

Enatos gazed intently at Kojou as she said, "—I request of thee to fulfill thy promise."

Kojou returned her gaze with a questioning look. "...Promise?"

“Thou pledged to offer me delicious ices, didst thou not?”

“Ahh, that. Yeah, I did promise, didn’t I...?”

Kojou groped through vague memories and nodded. The ruckus that followed must have made him forget, but he felt certain he had run his mouth in such a fashion.

Enatos listened to Kojou’s reply, smiling wryly in satisfaction as she pointed at Lulu’s and loftily commanded, “Then carry out thy task with haste.”

Avrora, standing beside him as she listened, puffed up her cheeks and uttered an unclear murmur of apparent displeasure. Her rather offended look seemed to say, *Why does he need to take orders from her...?*

*Well, I did promise, so I’ve gotta do it,* thought Kojou with a sigh. “...So what do you wanna eat?”

“Hmm,” Enatos said with a nod. “Offer me the finest of all.”

“So I should pick what I like, huh? I could just pick vanilla for you, y’know. How ’bout you, Avrora?”

“A s-strawberry, caramel, milk chocolate triple!”

Avrora gave the clerk her order with her antagonism on full display. Naturally, she was accustomed to doing so. Precisely for that reason, Enatos lodged an objection.

“Wait. Kojou, why do you permit Dodekatos to select three times?”

“That’s how the menu works. If you don’t like it, how ’bout you order a triple, too?”

Kojou explained with some annoyance. Naturally, that would mean triple the price. But...

“Quadruple.”

“Huh?”

“If Dodekatos has three scoops, I demand four.”

Enatos repeated her thoughtless request, with God-only-knew what logic behind it. Kojou shook his head with an exasperated look.

“Quadruples don’t exist. The menu only goes up to a triple!”

“Hngh?!”

Apparently, Kojou’s explanation did the trick, for a look of resignation came over Enatos. However, the clerk listening to the exchange just *had* to open her mouth.

“Ah, I can do a quadruple if you want.”

Kojou was shocked.

“Huh?! You can?!”

The young, female clerk playfully raised a finger to her lips.

“Yes. We have a hidden menu that is not disclosed to the general public. Actually, we can do up to seven scoops.”

“What?!”

“S-seven! Seven!”

Kojou suppressed the twitch on his face as Aurora pressed her case. Enatos wedged herself ahead of Aurora in the meantime.

“Of course, for me as well!”

“Whaaaaat?! Wait a sec, how much do you two think that’s all gonna cost?!”

“T-toppings, too! Nuts and macaroons!”

“Hmm, I want them all. Put everything on top!”

“Aaaaaaaaaaagh?! A-are you devils?!”

Blood drained from Kojou’s face as the cost of all that ice cream added up. Lulu’s ice cream was considered fairly reasonably priced for its flavor, but with such an order, it certainly was expensive.

Both Kaleid Bloods blinked at Kojou’s despairing words of censure and shook their heads as they said, “Ah, we are not devils.”

“We are vampires. Obviously.”

“Yeah, I knew that! Yes, you are!”



Kojou vented with a shout. The clerk laughed herself silly at their exchange as she handed over the finished ice cream. She'd given him a very slight discount (such as it was), no doubt out of pity for him.

"...It is delicious," Enatos muttered in surprise after taking a bite of her ice cream.

"That so. Well, I'm glad."

Kojou smiled in relief at Enatos's very human-sounding words. It'd have been pretty sad if she'd made an order that crazy and wasn't at least a little happy with it.

Enatos seemed to have something in mind as she tendered the huge mountain of ice cream before Kojou.

"Dost thou wish to taste it as well, Kojou?"

"I'll have a bite, then."

Kojou nibbled at Enatos's ice cream without harboring any special misgivings. It was so much ice cream, he figured it wasn't strange for Enatos to decide that she couldn't eat it all by herself.

"...?!"

Avrora's eyes popped wide as she watched Kojou's behavior. She wedged herself between Kojou and Enatos and thrust her own ice cream cone forward.

"A-Avrora?"

"...Hmph! Hmph!"

"You want me to eat yours, too?! Wait a sec, if I eat too much cold stuff all at once I'll..."

Kojou was trying to make excuses when Avrora shoved her ice cream right into his open mouth. Kojou let out a muffled yelp at having an entire scoop in his mouth. Sharp pain stabbed at his temple, and tears welled in his eyes. Of course, he couldn't even tell whether the ice cream tasted any good.

"...I thank thee, Kojou Akatsuki. Thou hast certainly fulfilled thy agreement."

Enatos had apparently finished eating her ice cream while Kojou was writhing

around. She licked the edges of her lips, showing him a satisfied-looking smile.

“You should get Zaharias to feed you tastier stuff, y’know,” Kojou murmured, not out of humility, but rather, simple doubt.

Enatos made no reply. She merely shook her head in silence. Then, she drew a single card out of the hip pocket of her protective suit. It was a metal plate smaller than a postcard.

“Take this, Dodekatos.”

Enatos tossed the card. Aurora somehow managed to stop it from falling to the ground.

The short symbols on the card’s surface were unknown to Kojou, but apparently Aurora could read them.

“’Tis an invitation from Zaharias,” Enatos said quietly, gazing at him.

Those words told Kojou in no uncertain terms that she had merely been obeying Zaharias’s commands. Zaharias had dispatched her as a simple messenger. He had given her the task for no reason other than because Kojou and Aurora had already encountered her previously.

By no means had Enatos escaped Zaharias’s control. That very moment, Zaharias was treating her as his own personal weapon.

“The night of the next full moon, the Blazing Banquet shall resume.”

With that, Enatos walked off.

Kojou and Aurora stood rooted to the spot, dumbfounded as they watched her depart.

The spring rain began to fall once more, leaving them both cold and wet.

The banquet would begin. Their gentle, peaceful days of tranquility had come to an end.

Water droplets gently fell against Aurora’s face, quietly rolling downward; peacefully, silently, like tears.



## *Intermission iii*

The children—Kojou Akatsuki, bound by chains; and Asagi Aiba, similarly tied to her chair—were asleep. Yukina Himeragi was kneeling atop the carpet in proper Japanese style, her eyes closed as if in meditation, still gripping her silver spear.

It was red outside the iron-barred window. This, the rust-red space filled with the scent of dried blood, was the Prison Barrier proper, the otherworld constructed in Natsuki Minamiya's dream.

“...nn!”

From time to time, Kojou Akatsuki's face contorted in apparent anguish as he continued to slumber. He was reexperiencing his own past, as if for the first time, in the form of a dream, a ritual using No. 014, the grimoire for manipulating personal history.

A grimoire that could rob another person of the time he or she had experienced sounded like a very convenient thing, but the price one had to pay for it was comparatively high, for it also meant accepting the mental pain and suffering the other person had undergone. That went even more for psychological wounds experienced in the past by one's own former self.

“...”

Natsuki seemed bored of watching her pupils dream as she shifted her gaze to the magic circle at her feet.

The symbols inscribed on the dark orange carpet were imbued with a faint magical glow, pulsing eerily. Yukina had explained the magic circle was there to protect Kojou and Asagi if Kojou's demonic energy ran amok, but that was actually nothing more than a convenient side effect.

Natsuki had constructed the magic circle with a different objective in mind.

There was a memory that Kojou Akatsuki had not experienced until the very end of the time concerned—knowledge of an “Avrora” unknown to him.

Obtaining this was Natsuki's true objective.

She had taken the code written inside the grimoire, fusing it with a high-level ritual. And the vast demonic power of Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor, was the driving force behind the ritual. Employing the same logic as using a giant particle accelerator to analyze subatomic particles, the vestiges left of "her" upon the sediments of time would be dredged up by brute force.

Finally, her faint image floated up before Natsuki's eyes. Her form was not completely stable, perhaps due to data degradation. Even so, her contours were clear. She had blond hair like billowing fire, and blue eyes that glimmered like flame. She was a small-statured girl with fairylike features.

"...Who...art thou?" The vague silhouette opened her mouth. Her voice was mixed with white noise, making it difficult to hear.

"I believe this is the first time we have met face-to-face, Root Aurora—"

The girl slowly smiled as Natsuki addressed her. Her face seemed pleased, as if to say that she finally remembered who she was.

"A witch. The Witch of the Void, contracted to the Golden Devil... Hmm."

She gazed at her own indistinct hands and murmured:

"What is this body?"

"A spiritual remnant given form. You are essentially a ghost."

"Thou wouldst speak with the dead, witch?" the girl inquired with a tone of disdain.

"This is inside my dream. It has more than a few conveniences."

Natsuki gave an apathetic reply as she opened the fan in her right hand; a moment later, countless chains spewed forth from thin air, lightly grazing the girl's flesh as they enveloped her.

She was like a helpless butterfly trapped in a spider's web. Or, perhaps a marionette animated by chains.

"What dost thou seek with me?"

The blond girl was trapped, unable to move, yet her inquiry seemed amused

even so.

“There is something I want to ask you.”

“And that is?”

“It concerns you. Artificial primogenitor, for what purpose were you constructed?”

“I am a weapon. I am nothing more, nothing less. Would you ask the spent bullets abandoned on the battlefield why they were constructed, Witch of the Void?”

The girl followed up her evasive answer to Natsuki with a laugh that made her indistinct contours waver.

“Then let me change the question. Root Aurora—what is The Cleansing?”

Natsuki quietly posed the question. It was as if those words were a key, for the air given off by the blond girl shifted. The magic circle at her feet grew brighter as her blond hair floated and danced into the air.

“Hee...hee-hee...hee-hee-hee-hee-hee... Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The girl’s beautiful lips contorted with laughter. It was as if she was mocking, scorning, cursing the whole world.

“I see, Root...you are...!” Natsuki’s doll-like facial features scowled as she murmured.

The chains enveloping the girl broke away one by one. The magic circle glowed even brighter, enough that one could scarcely look at it directly, as the overflowing demonic energy began to warp the world around them.

The girl’s cackling, full of resentment, resounded throughout the Prison Barrier.

The dead spirit’s laughter continued to echo, on and on—



CHAPTER FOUR  
THE LAST SUPPER

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE LAST SUPPER

#### 1

It had been barely a decade since an alliance of ghoulish clans had called themselves Nelapsi and declared independence. Japan did not yet have international relations with them; many people didn't even know Nelapsi existed. In the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island, virtually no humans paid much attention to the baffling news.

None save the tiny handful that had experienced prior contact with Nelapsi—  
“Signs of an outbreak...in the Nelapsi Autonomous Region...?”

Kojou had forgotten to shut off the television, spotting the odd news on the ticker by pure chance.

It was early morning in the Akatsuki residence's living room. The smell of butter on toast enveloped the room.

The morning talk show program was airing images from a grainy home video. In a foreign city, a berserk mob was pouring out, indiscriminately attacking everyone around them. The shocking images looked like they belonged in a zombie documentary.

“They say it's a new type of vampire contagion. Scary, huh?” Nagisa, wearing an apron over her school uniform, was nibbling on a tomato as she replied.

It wasn't that she didn't feel any anxiety, but Nagisa's voice was composed. Even if it was a communicable disease, it was occurring in a foreign country far from Japan's shores. It couldn't have felt very real.

Kojou would have no doubt had the same reaction had he not previously heard the word *Nelapsi*.

“...What do they mean by vampire infection? Don't tell me they're saying crap



like, if a vampire drinks your blood, it turns you into a vampire?”

“The World Health Organization doesn’t seem to know much about it yet. Since Nelapsi’s been fighting wars all over the place lately, some people think it’s a biological weapon. Hopefully no more people get infected, though.”

Nagisa explained in response to Kojou’s doubts. Information was apparently limited; the talk show host was pretty much repeating identical information.

According to the host, the source of the infection had not yet been determined. The contagion struck human and demon alike; the afflicted patients lost their ability to reason and began indiscriminately assaulting everyone around them. Also, the number of infected was skyrocketing.

The infection itself conferred traits similar to G-type—ghoul-type—vampires, with many of the infected displaying a high degree of physical strength, sense of smell, and other physical abilities. On the other hand, the infected had pronounced memory loss over the passage of time, eventually resulting in the complete loss of rational thought, making it very difficult for them to even sustain themselves day-to-day.

It was unclear whether this was a mere transmissible disease or the emergence of a new, unconfirmed variety of demon. Since they had not narrowed down the origin, there was no established method of treatment. There were even concerns that it might spread across the globe—

Having explained to that point, the talk show went into a commercial break, and after that, an infomercial. Kojou nibbled on his toast as he gazed idly at a pro baseball digest from the night before.

“Well, Kojou, I’m heading off.”

Nagisa, having put her outfit in order during that time, carried a sports bag in one hand as she called out to him. It was still just a little early to go to school.

“Ahh...morning cheerleading practice, huh? Don’t overdo it, you hear?”

“It’s all right, it’s all right. My health has been great lately. Make sure you’re not late, either, Kojou.”

“Sure,” Kojou said, listlessly leaning against the sofa as he watched his little

sister head off. He licked a bit of butter off the tips of his fingers as he mulled the host's words.

“Vampires...but not from the First, Second, or Third Primogenitors...”

The dazzling rays of the morning sun made Nagisa squint as she left the apartment.

It was six thirty AM. Naturally, the road that led to the monorail station was still empty at that hour. A pleasant morning breeze blew over the deserted hill road.

Nagisa hummed an off-note tune as she walked toward the station. Except for a housewife out walking her dog, she didn't really bump into anyone and reached the intersection in five minutes, half the time she usually took walking that path.

Just after she finished crossing the intersection, an unfamiliar woman sought her attention.

“Miss Nagisa Akatsuki?”

“Ah, yes?”

She instantly responded to her name, but the people standing there seemed rather odd. Three men and one woman were all dressed in plain, nondescript suits. Their appearances suggested they were from a variety of generations, making it hard to get a read on the group. The unified, unwavering look in their eyes was a little scary.

“Er...who might...you be?”

Nagisa's voice became shrill as she realized that at some point the group had fanned around her on all sides. They didn't feel like police, nor did she think they were acquaintances of her parents. Mimori and Gajou's friends were all weirdos, but each and every one had an aura around them that put Nagisa at ease.

That was not the case for these four individuals. They seemed sane at first glance, but it felt like they were missing an important aspect of their humanity. The air around them held no room for dissent, as if to say, *Death to unbelievers*.

The woman formed a smile with only the corners of her lips as she said, “Do not be concerned. We are champions of the Guardians of Eden, a relief organization for mankind. We work for the eradication of demons to protect the lives of the good people of this city.”

At the very least, it meant she could feign being normal, but Nagisa felt pathological fear and hatred emanating from the woman when she spoke of eradicating demons.

“You’re...supremacists...?”

“Some criticize us in such terms. But, hey, how do you honestly feel about demons? Don’t you think they’re scary?”

“Th-that’s...”

Nagisa digested the word *scary*. Certainly, she had demonophobia, but that was rooted in personal past experiences. She didn’t think her own personal fear was reason enough to go on a pogrom.

Then, the woman continued her one-sided assertions as if she’d never intended to listen to Nagisa’s reply from the start.

“It is said that vile crimes by demons have receded since the signing of the Holy Ground Treaty, but that is a great lie propagated by the government. They’ve been handing out doctored statistics while covering up the real data.”

“Er... I really need to get to school, so...”

Nagisa interrupted the woman’s words and attempted to flee. However, the woman spread both arms wide to block Nagisa’s path and smiled.

“I’m sorry. It’s all right, we won’t take up much of your time.”

The woman pulled something out of her suit pocket—a small handgun. It was a snub-nosed revolver that looked like a small movie prop.

“We shall be finished in short order. For the sake of preventing the Fourth Primogenitor’s revival, please die now.”

The woman grinned as she trained the gun barrel on Nagisa, who suddenly realized that the other three people were gripping guns of their own. Their eyes did not possess a single shred of sympathy or pity toward Nagisa, only the

exhilaration peculiar to those with absolute faith in their own brand of justice.

“You’re humans but...you’ll kill humans?” Nagisa asked them in a shaky voice.

That instant, enmity came over the woman’s face for the first time.

“It’s useless to put on a show for sympathy. You have a lot of nerve calling yourself a human being, heretic priestess!”

The sudden onslaught of ferocious malice gave Nagisa an inescapable sense of despair. Likely, from the woman’s point of view, whether Nagisa was an ally or enemy of demons did not matter. All she wanted was to satisfy her own pride. In that moment, she happened to be seized by her enmity toward demons, but it was anyone’s guess what her wrath would target next. There was no reasoning with her from the beginning.

“S...someone... Help me... Kojou...!”

Nagisa continued to hold her sports bag as she weakly murmured.

“If you do not resist, I shall grant you an easy death.”

The woman made the declaration in an apathetic tone, like it was a dry formality, and put her finger on the trigger.

A *boom* struck Nagisa’s ears. A dazzling beam dyed her vision white.

Then, the light turned into a shock wave that battered the supremacist group.

“—Fool.”

The beam was not gunfire, but rather lightning. There was a small-statured girl, shrouded by electricity, who could have been fourteen or fifteen. Her hair was cropped short like a boy’s; she wore silver armor with gold accents.

The armored girl stood atop a lamppost along the coastal road as she glared down at the fallen supremacists. She looked rather like a small, female knight, but there was no sword in her hand. Instead, the girl was gripping a pale, glimmering thunderbolt like a spear.

One of the supremacists remained on the road as he let out a pathetic cry.

“Eek...! P...Pemptos...?!”

The suited woman, brought back to her senses by the voice, fired in Nagisa’s

direction. But the bullet did not reach its target. Before Nagisa's eyes, a second girl annihilated the bullet as if gouging out the very space around her.

The girl's beautiful facial features contorted in a laugh. In each palm rested a pitch-black sphere that could carve into space itself.

Her hair, tied in long, twin ponytails, gently undulated like two snakes. She had heterochromia; the left and right irises were different colors.

"...Tritos...!"

The suited woman lowered her gun as she looked up at the girl, standing before Nagisa as if shielding her. She now knew that she could not harm Nagisa with such a weak weapon.

The supremacists tripped over one another as they rose to their feet, scrambling in an attempt to flee the area. As they did so, a third girl, enveloped in mist, emerged from thin air to stand before them. Her small body was protected by thick armor, with over half of her beautiful face concealed by her helm.

In the blink of an eye, the silver-colored fog shrouding her surrounded the supremacists to blot them from sight.

The woman, left all by herself, crawled in an effort to escape.

"...Even Tetartos?! No...!"

However, mist caught up to her body, which crumbled away without so much as a sound. In reality, the air was the woman herself; her body was no longer solid and had transformed into mist.

Finally, the wind blew, clearing the fog away; there was no longer a single sign of the supremacists anywhere. They had been swallowed by the mist whole, vanishing without a trace.

The girl in silver armor leapt down to the ground and asked Nagisa, "Are you all right?"

The two other girls knelt on one knee, looking up at Nagisa the same way.

"Who are you...? What happened to those people just now...?!" Nagisa was at a complete loss.

Strangely, she did not feel any fear. But it didn't feel real. The girls' power was complete overkill for merely saving Nagisa's life. Their very beings seemed to be natural disasters. If criminals died from falling prey to an earthquake or a tornado, did you thank the weather? It didn't exactly come up under normal circumstances.

And yet, those girls, natural disasters personified, were kneeling reverentially before Nagisa, almost like knights pledging fealty to their queen—

“I...see... You're...”

Nagisa, suddenly understanding something, murmured haltingly to that effect. The glint of emotion faded from her wide-open eyes.

“So you have been...watching us...all this time...”

The girls nodded at Nagisa.

The silver-armored girl kept her face courteously lowered as she opened her mouth.

“It was our error that Dodekatos's coffin was opened. Forgive us.”

Her voice held a tone of regret, as if she was confessing her own mistake. Yet, at the same time, Nagisa felt awe and affection toward her. These girls, catastrophes incarnate, were afraid of Nagisa's existence.

Then, Nagisa looked down at the girls and calmly stated:

“I forgive you—”

Nagisa walked toward the train station once more as if nothing had happened.

The blond girls watched her as she left like that.

The dazzling morning rays of the Demon Sanctuary's morning fell upon the crowded city.

Somewhere, something was beginning to spiral out of control.

## 2

Gajou Akatsuki's laboratory was an old building on the verge of being

condemned, constructed on a university site in Itogami City. Gajou was a professor there. Though treated as a teacher on the surface, the job was more like a cover given to a hired gun, and the pay was cheap. However, being a “university professor” was a convenient thing for Gajou on his frequent international trips. Besides, he was grateful for the mundane fact that, as a man living away from his family, he had a lab he could sleep at.

The small lab, resembling a one-room apartment, was cramped with piles of old books and tomes. Gajou lay flopped over a sofa placed in a narrow space between the stacks.

His tanned cheeks had a thin beard on them from not shaving. There were bags under his eyes from late-night work.

Under Gajou’s hand rested a foreign tome containing writings about the Fourth Primogenitor. After having sought for a way to save his daughter, Nagisa, for so long, he’d finally arrived at such a precious resource.

But the information recorded within only drove Gajou deeper into despair. He had deciphered the mystery behind the Blazing Banquet. He now knew the reason why Avrora had been sealed in the ruins on Gozo, and the nature of what was possessing Nagisa. And that truth drove Gajou to despair.

Gajou tossed the tome onto the table and listlessly closed his eyes. Then, on the verge of his first moments of sleep in three days, the door to the lab burst open. Veldiana, dressed in a black maid outfit, flew in without as much as a knock.

“—Gajou!”

Her hair was disheveled as she clutched a wrinkled English-language newspaper in her hand.

“Heya, Veldiana. That’s a different look than usual. Taking a break from work?”

Gajou gloomily brushed aside his lengthening forelocks as he sluggishly sat up. Veldiana thrust the newspaper against Gajou’s chest.

“What’s the meaning of this, Gajou?! What’s going on in the Nelapsi Autonomous Region?!”

“Ahh...this?”

Gajou glanced at the headline and studied the story beneath.

The vampirism outbreak occurring in Nelapsi had received only a small blurb at a corner of the page. It wasn't that they didn't understand the gravity of the situation; there was simply too little information.

But some people immediately understood the cause of the outbreak. Gajou was one.

“It means that bastard Zaharias has finally gotten serious,” he said without amusement. He'd known this would happen someday from the moment Zaharias took over the former Duchy of Caruana and laid his hands on a Kaleid Blood. If anything, it was later than he'd expected.

Veldiana asked in a broken voice, “Don't tell me that...this vampirism outbreak is related to the Blazing Banquet?”

“You didn't know?” Gajou raised an eyebrow in surprise. “You didn't hear from the Bookmaker? One of the conditions of being an Elector is ruling a territory of a certain size—as well as a sufficient number of citizens living within it.”

“How is that related to the outbreak? Certainly, I'd heard that, should the Fourth Primogenitor completely awaken within an Elector's domain, it would become a new Dominion, but—”

As Veldiana spoke, she cut herself off in sudden surprise. She'd apparently just thought of something. Her face went rather pale.

“Don't tell me...it's the reverse...?!”

“Pretty much. It's not that the Elector's territory turns into a Dominion from the Fourth Primogenitor awakening. Rather, Electors conduct sorcerous rituals to awaken the Fourth Primogenitor, rituals that use hundreds of thousands of their own territory's residents as human sacrifices.”

“Human...sacrifices?! ”

Gajou's words, spoken without emotion, made Veldiana's shoulders tremble.

What was now known as the Nelapsi Autonomous Region was the land



formerly ruled by the Caruana family. Over the course of hundreds of years, loyal citizens had served Veldiana's birth family generation after generation. Of course, their ranks included people that Veldiana knew personally. And their lives were in peril due to the new outbreak.

Zaharias had set the entire situation into motion.

"They traced a magic circle in the Nelapsi Autonomous Zone? You mean to tell me that Zaharias used the Nosferatu to invade the Duchy of Caruana to have the land he needed for the sorcerous ritual?! That's why he killed my father...?! Gajou, did you know this?!"

"...Your sister's the one who told me all of it."

Veldiana was on her feet, wildly chewing Gajou out, but he silenced her with a single word.

Gajou brusquely toppled the mountain of books and retrieved a single file: the report that Liana Caruana, Veldiana's elder sister, had overseen. Within it was written the truth about the sorcerous ritual known as the Blazing Banquet. Veldiana violently scattered the report in front of her.

Shaking her head as if she could not believe it, she retreated, wobbling over to the windowsill.

"My sister, Liana... Then, she was trying to obtain Dodekatos for..."

"I'm pretty sure she intended to hijack the magic circle Zaharias had traced and use it to awaken the Fourth Primogenitor. Liana intended to become Elector herself."

"Then Sister...intended to sacrifice the people of the Duchy of Caruana...?!" Veldiana mumbled, her unfocused eyes wavering.

The Blazing Banquet was really a sorcerous ritual to completely awaken the Fourth Primogenitor. A vast number of human sacrifices, hundreds of thousands of lives, would be the catalyst. The ritual was a grand awakening that none could call unworthy of the World's Mightiest Vampire.

Liana knew this and had sought the revival of the Fourth Primogenitor nonetheless.

“Liana didn’t have any other way of getting the land back from Zaharias. If she let things be, Zaharias would’ve done the ritual on his own. The damage couldn’t be avoided either way.”

Gajou seemed to be speaking in Liana’s defense. However, Veldiana looked as if she was backed into a corner, shaking her head with intense emotion apparent.

“...I’d...have stopped this. If only I’d known about this, I would have stopped him sooner!”

“You’d have killed Zaharias?”

“That’s right!”

Veldiana glared at Gajou with watery eyes. They held a fierce sense of guilt that resembled madness. *That’s a bad sign*, thought Gajou, clicking his tongue inside his own mind. Veldiana wasn’t thinking rationally anymore. She had tunnel vision, and she was unnerved by her sense of responsibility toward her former subjects.

“You couldn’t have. You understand that, don’t you?” Gajou said in an uncharacteristically stern tone. He meant to drag the girl back to reason even a little bit, but pointing this out only made Veldiana dig in her heels.

“I’d kill him, even if it meant dying in the process...!”

In a low voice, Veldiana murmured the words like a curse. Gajou’s lips twisted in visible dismay.

“I didn’t tell you, and neither did Liana, because we both figured you’d say something like that.”

“If Dodekatos—”

“...Ahh?”

“If Dodekatos gets her memories back, I can use a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor... I can kill even Zaharias!”

A cheerful smile came over Veldiana. She looked like a woman possessed.

“Hey, Veldiana!”

“I know. Nagisa, yes? Your daughter stole Dodekatos’s memories. If Dodekatos meets Nagisa face-to-face, she will surely regain her power!”

“That’s what we thought, too. Until Aurora woke up, that is!” Gajou put a hand on Veldiana’s shoulder, shouting as if trying to get through to a recalcitrant child. “But we were wrong. We were so, so wrong. We had it all wrong from the start!”

“Shut up! Be silent!”

Veldiana reflexively swung her arm. Her slender fingertips cut Gajou’s flesh in a single, mighty blow that sent his tall, slender body flying. Even if she looked like a slim woman, Veldiana had a vampire’s physical strength. Gajou could not withstand that.

He tried to stand up, but his legs buckled, sending him to his knees. Fresh blood was leaking out from his contorted lips. In one blow, Veldiana had ripped Gajou’s abdomen, with the wound apparently reaching to his intestines.

“Aah...”

Seeing Gajou like that, it was Veldiana who trembled. She looked down at her own fingertips, wet with Gajou’s blood, and exhaled as if it wasn’t sinking in.

There were countless needle marks on her arm, too many for even a vampire’s recuperative ability to heal. The drugs she was abusing had made her unable to moderate her own strength.

“I won’t believe a thing you say anymore...”

Pressed into a corner, Veldiana spat the words at Gajou to justify herself. She violently waded through the mountains of piled-up books as she headed outside.

“Veldiana...!”

Gajou tried to stop her, but his strength seemed to expire as he fell onto the floor. The fresh blood flowing from Gajou’s wound was forming a pool of blood around him.

He rolled onto his back, limply gazing up at the lab’s ceiling.

The blood showed no sign of stopping. *I know that’s dangerous if I don’t do*

*something, but my body won't move, so there's nothing I can do*, he thought, as if this were someone else's problem. After having cheated death so many times, buying the farm at the hands of a vampire heiress's temper seemed so ridiculous. All he could do was make a strained smile.

It pained him that he'd never told Nagisa, but for all intents and purposes, his duty was already done. There was nothing more Gajou could do for the sake of his daughter. All he could do was entrust affairs to the actor waiting next in line.

Gajou gazed at his bloodstained fingertips, thinking he should at least write a witty dying message, but just as he began to think of one, he suddenly realized that someone was beside him. It was a woman in a wrinkled, white gown, standing there as if she was lording over Gajou.

"Mm-hmmm...you make quite a sight, Gajou."

She had morning hair and half-lidded eyes. Her baby face made her look like a girl ten years younger, but she had very large breasts.

For some reason, she had an amused-looking smile on her face as she gazed at the fallen, blood-soaked Gajou.

"Heya, Mimori. Did you overhear all of that?"

Gajou's lips twitched into a sarcastic smile of his own. Mimori Akatsuki crouched at his side and said, "See, this is what you get for carelessly laying your hands on the serious, brooding types. I wonder if you'll reflect on your sins a little."

"I didn't put one hand on her! If you heard us talk, there's no way you'd get that wrong, would you?"

For once, Gajou made a rather annoyed objection, but Mimori just coolly narrowed her eyes.

"But you did use her."

"...Well, yeah."

Gajou nodded with a pained look. To save his debilitated daughter Nagisa, he needed the Key to the coffin, which was passed to the family of the Duke of Caruana, no matter what it took. The only one who knew its location was

Veldiana, the sole survivor of the duke's family. That was why Gajou had made contact with her and brought her to Itogami Island.

He hadn't intended to deceive her, but having employed the revival of the Caruana family as bait, he couldn't deny using her. If one thought of being killed by her hand as the cost, it did seem like poetic justice.

"You always attract the difficult girls. I hope Kojou does not take after you. How concerning," she said soberly.

"Kojou, huh... Who'd have thought I'd end up relying on him to the bitter end."

Gajou chuckled with an amused smile as he recalled the face of his still somewhat unreliable son.

Gajou's role was over. Kojou was the only one who could save Nagisa now. Now that he had become a Blood Servant of the Fourth Primogenitor, his existence was the banquet's only wild card.

But not from Zaharias's point of view. He was a wild card to the group pulling the strings from behind the curtain—the Lion King Agency.

Worst case, Gajou would lose two children instead of one, but even so, hoping Kojou could pull it off was the only option that remained. Besides, it wasn't as if he hadn't prepared any presents for them.

"Mimori...there should be a cardboard box buried with the books around here..."

"Hmm?"

"The time might come when what's on the inside is needed. If the time comes, get it to Kojou, would ya?"

"Cardboard box, you mean this one? The sender's address is...the Aldegian Royal Palace?"

Mimori grinned as she glared at the international postal code.

"Come to think of it, the queen of that country is a very beautiful woman, isn't she?"

“Yeah, suppose she is. It’s been a while since I’ve met her, but I doubt she looks any different. She’s one hell of a schemer on the inside, though. Well, no doubt she’s quite a lad—ee?!”

“Hmmm.”

Mimori continued to smile as she ground the heel of her shoe close to Gajou’s open wound. Gajou’s deathly pale face twisted from the intense pain as he weakly laughed.

“Ah...incidentally, Mimori, it feels like I’m finally bleeding to death through this thing, no joke, so I’d appreciate if you could patch me up already?”

“Tee-hee-hee.”

Mimori fished some ice out of a cooler, but she began moving her tongue around like she was going to lick it. Gajou sighed deeply as he gazed at the sly, sadistic smile of his ex-wife.

“Gimme a break...”

### 3

The polite but mechanical voice Kojou heard on the phone belonged to an artificial intelligence.

“Business trip?”

“Yes. Mimori Akatsuki, Chief of Research, is on a business trip off-island today. If you have business with her, may I take your message?”

“Ah...nah, I get it. Just tell her to get in touch with me...her son, as soon as possible.”

He added a “please and thank you” before ending the call. The cell phone in his hand cracked as he gripped harder without realizing it.

“Shit, what the hell?! Right when I really need them, I can’t get in touch with either of my parents?!” Kojou spat, violently pounding the corridor wall. A nearby elderly teacher glared at him, but Kojou had no time to take heed.

That evening was probably the banquet Enatos had mentioned—the night of the last full moon of April. He’d already informed Gajou and the others of that

much.

Gajou had replied, “Just ignore it,” and Kojou agreed. They had no reason to respond to Zaharias’s invitation like gullible fools. If the phase of the moon was fortuitous for Zaharias, that was reason enough to avoid him at all costs. If Avrora’s formal demonic registration was approved, they could get the Island Guard to take custody of her. That way, Zaharias surely wouldn’t be able to lay a finger on her. In other words, all they had to do was get through the night, and she would be completely safe.

However, now that the night was drawing close, Kojou began to feel uneasy. That was thanks to the morning news: the mysterious vampirism outbreak occurring in the Nelapsi Autonomous Region...

The timing was simply too good to brush it off as a mere coincidence.

If the outbreak was Zaharias’s doing, the banquet was no longer the concern of Kojou and Avrora alone. He couldn’t say for certain that a similar disaster would avoid Itogami Island.

“This ain’t the time to get stubborn. Guess I’ve got no choice but to go crying to Natsuki...”

Kojou subconsciously scowled as he recalled the face of his overbearing, charismatic homeroom teacher. He was well aware that carelessly asking her for aid was begging for some serious payback later, but even so, Natsuki was an Attack Mage counselor attached to the school. She had pull with the police and Island Guard, too. Now that he couldn’t rely on either parent, he couldn’t think of any other acquaintance who had what it took to defy Zaharias.

Besides, Avrora might well become a Saikai Academy student in the very near future. If Kojou got on his hands and knees and begged, the odds of Natsuki helping him were fairly high.

“Wait... Oh, right...”

Kojou’s expression grew taut as he remembered a means he ought to try before begging. There was one more person who might be able to defy Zaharias: Avrora herself. If she could wield power equal to Enatos, even Zaharias shouldn’t be able to harm Avrora by brute force.

Unfortunately, that was predicated on her recovering her memory. The key to that was...

“Nagisa...huh?”

*So it comes down to that in the end*, Kojou thought, exhaling as he walked toward the middle school section. Lunch break would be over soon, but he figured he’d have enough time to at least speak with Nagisa.

He’d ask her to meet Avrora again. If he properly explained the circumstances to Nagisa rather than ambushing her like the first time, she should understand. At the very least, it was worth trying to persuade her.

Just as Kojou made preparations to leave the classroom, Asagi called out to him.

“Kojou? Where are you going?”

*Great timing.* Kojou turned toward her in a pleading pose.

“Sorry, Asagi. I’m gonna miss afternoon classes, so could you please make up a good excuse for me?”

“Wait a... Where do you think you’re going?!”

Kojou brushed off Asagi’s attempt to stop him and headed for the classroom’s entrance. Her face looked grave as she guessed from Kojou’s demeanor that something was wrong.

“Did something happen with Avrora?”

Her question, posed quietly, stopped Kojou in his tracks. He glanced at Asagi, meeting her worried gaze.

Asagi knew that Avrora was an unregistered demon. She seemed concerned that her connection might get her into some kind of trouble. Moreover, Asagi was pretty jealous of all the attention he gave Avrora.

“Nah, it’s all right. It’s nothing. Like I’d let something happen, anyway...!”

Kojou smiled firmly and shook his head. *I get it*, Asagi seemed to say with a slump of her shoulders. She was conveying that she didn’t exactly like it, but she would not press the matter further.



“Is there anything I can help with?” she offered.

“I suppose so,” Kojou said, pausing. “Let’s throw a party.”

“Huh?”

Kojou’s non sequitur of a suggestion made Asagi widen her eyes, catching her off guard.

“Ah, come to think of it, it’s gonna be my birthday soon. Let’s throw a party and have some fun.”

“Your birthday is in May.”

“You remembered that pretty well.”

Kojou felt a little strange as he made that remark. Actually, his birthday was at the start of April, smack-dab in the middle of Golden Week. Thanks to that, even his friends tended to forget about it.

“I just— I just happened to remember it!”

“That’s how it is, so please!”

“That’s how *what* is? Geez!”

Asagi, red-faced and seemingly keeping panic just at bay, waved a hand at Kojou as if shooing him away. Kojou went right out and headed to the middle school campus.

Fortunately for him, Kojou met a familiar face midway down the connecting corridor: a black-haired, glasses-wearing schoolgirl who looked like the chairman of a committee. Kojou remembered speaking to her several times when she’d gone to visit Nagisa in the hospital.

Noticing that Kojou was approaching her, the girl stopped with a mystified look.

“Akatsuki?”

“Koushima, was it? You’re in the same class and year as Nagisa, right?”

“Yes.”

Sakura Koushima made a businesslike reply as if it was nothing special. She

seemed accustomed to speaking with upperclassmen; maybe she really was cut out to be a committee chairman.

“Sorry, could you get ahold of Nagisa for me? It’s a bit tough for me to go into the middle school campus and all.”

Kojou bowed his head as he spoke.

It was a campus that he had passed through on a daily basis just a few short weeks before, but he hesitated to set one toe into it since graduating middle school. He somehow felt like it wasn’t his place anymore.

However, Sakura looked up at Kojou with a neutral expression and shook her head.

“You didn’t know?”

“What?”

“Nagisa left early. Someone from the hospital came to pick her up.”

“...Hospital?”

Kojou sounded like an idiot as he parroted the word.

He’d heard nothing about Nagisa being contacted by the hospital. If her physical condition worsened and she was transported there, they should have called Kojou first, but they had not. Even so, someone from the hospital coming to pick her up, rather than her being taken away by ambulance, was a strange story in itself.

“Who the hell picked her up...?”

As he murmured, Kojou felt unstable, almost as if the ground was suddenly crumbling beneath his feet.

Sakura Koushima casually replied in an even tone reminiscent of a homunculus:

“She said she was from MAR... Miss Tooyama, I believe.”

## 4

Veldiana licked the fresh blood off her fingertips as she returned to the

marina. She'd taken a hit of a drug along the way, and the effects were still present, but she was dominated by a bizarre sense of exhilaration.

Veldiana thought that the slanted afternoon sunrays were rather gloomy as she tottered across the pier. A dry laugh was escaping her lips with no sign of stopping.

"Ah-ha-ha...ha-ha...ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Veldiana's steps were uncertain, almost as if she was drunk. She was aware that something inside of her broke the instant she wounded Gajou. Even if they called him the Death Returnee, in the end, Gajou was only human. She didn't think he could still be alive after such grievous injury.

Even if Gajou had only been using Veldiana, he was the one man who'd given her a reason for living. It was Gajou who had saved her, the daughter of a dishonored former lord, from maltreatment. Veldiana had unwittingly killed her own savior. There was no longer any human who would protect her.

She'd thrown away her demon registration bracelet on the way back. If someone discovered Gajou's body and contacted the Island Guard, they'd be able to use its location data to ascertain Veldiana's whereabouts.

She couldn't stay on Itogami Island. But even so, she didn't have anywhere else to go. All that Veldiana had left was her desire for vengeance against Zaharias.

"I'll kill you, Zaharias... I'll kill you, I'll kill you, I'll kill you, I'll kill you..."

As she climbed aboard the cruiser, Veldiana continued repeating the words to herself like she was chanting a curse.

The boat had been Gajou's property to begin with. Veldiana could not remain on it much longer. Consequently, before leaving it behind, Veldiana had to take back that which was hers: Dodekatos—the twelfth Kaleid Blood.

"...Veldiana?"

Avrora was on her knees, just finishing cleaning the boat. Veldiana had asked her to do so before heading out. Avrora might have been an amnesiac and rather clumsy, but she steadfastly did as ordered. She was no doubt very happy

to be needed by someone.

Though, in Veldiana's present state, the girl's innocence was annoying. If anything, seeing someone as young and ignorant as her past self only fanned the flames of her hatred.

Veldiana noticed the metal plate on the table. "What...is this?" she asked.

There were ancient sorcerous symbols engraved upon it. Veldiana couldn't completely make it out, but she recalled seeing several of the words before, allowing her to work out the gist of it.

"An invitation to the banquet...?! Zaharias sent this?!"

"Ah..."

Seeing Veldiana so surprised, Aurora shrank in apparent fright. She backed off with an earnest look on her face, like a nun being chewed out for sheltering a pagan.

"Why did you hide this from me?" Veldiana pressed the issue in a low voice.

"K-Kojou advised that...it was not necessary to respond to the summons."

"What did you say?!"

"Nor...do I desire to. I do not wish to go..."

Even as her unreliable voice quavered, Aurora spoke loud and clear. The instant Veldiana realized the girl was defying her, her mind went white, boiling over.

"Don't play games with me!" Veldiana shouted, indignant and angry as she grabbed hold of Aurora's arm. She dragged the girl to her feet and tried to lead her off the boat.

"I won't allow it. I will not! You're coming with me! You're going to kill Zaharias!"

"...N-no...!"

"Shut up! Just do as I say!"

The banquet under Zaharias's Dominion was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Veldiana to enact vengeance upon him. He had not only exposed his own

whereabouts but had also sent an engraved invitation to his unguarded flank. Of course, Zaharias probably had Nosferatu in his vicinity protecting him, but they would prove no hindrance. Veldiana had intended to go down with him from the start. If she fulfilled her revenge, she didn't care what happened to her after.

Because her head had banged against the wall, Aurora had lost consciousness, remaining still as Veldiana dragged her off the ship.

“—Vel?!”

Just as Veldiana was getting off the pier, someone called out to her in obvious surprise. It was Kojou Akatsuki, wearing a school uniform as he looked at her in shock.

“What the hell are you doing...? What did you do to Aurora?!”

Kojou's face stiffened when he realized Aurora was unconscious.

When she looked closer, Veldiana noticed that Kojou's breath was labored, as if he'd doggedly run all the way there. Apparently, he'd had his own issues to deal with. But, as Veldiana saw it, such things simply didn't matter anymore.

“Be quiet. It has nothing to do with you,” she declared coldly.

Kojou seemed nonplussed at her brush-off.

“Vel?! What are you saying...?!”

“You know, too, don't you, Kojou? What's going on in the Nelapsi Autonomous Region right now. That land is my birthplace. The people living there are the people of Caruana!”

Veldiana's shout was mixed with tears, and Kojou stood agape, rooted to the spot. She glared at him with hatred, her canines bare.

“I cannot forgive Zaharias. He took my father and my sister from me, and now he takes my people. I will kill him... I *will* kill him!”

“...And what, you're gonna use Aurora to do that?!”

Kojou was not overwhelmed by Veldiana's hatred; instead, he replied calmly.

For a moment, Veldiana's breath caught; then, a charming smile came over

her.

“What kind of nonsense are you spouting?”

Avrora was still unconscious when Veldiana grabbed her by the hair, lifting her up like her own possession.

“Of course. This is a weapon. She was built to destroy things, wasn’t she?”

“—Don’t give me that crap!”

Kojou coarsely howled as he sprang from the water break and moved to punch Veldiana. Veldiana was startled by his unexpected speed. His velocity was impossible for someone with human strength. Kojou’s physical capabilities were clearly well in excess of a normal vampire’s.

It finally sank in that he really was the Fourth Primogenitor’s Blood Servant.

Even so, he was no match for Veldiana, a pureblood vampire—!

“—Ganglot!”

A three-headed dog shrouded in flame appeared before Kojou. Its giant front paw caught him, tearing open his chest. Blood, flesh, and viscera spewed as the boy sailed through the air. He slammed against the ground, motionless.

“Ha-ha...ah-ha-ha-ha-ha... It’s your fault, Kojou Akatsuki. You’re the one who got in my way...! Ah-ha-ha-ha...ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Veldiana laughed loudly as she wiped the tears from her cheeks. She didn’t feel a single hint of fear, regret, or pity. All she felt was an unsettling, huge, gaping void where something in her chest should have been.

She resumed her walk, dragging the blond girl behind.

The night of the banquet grew near—

## 5

He awoke with the rays of the setting sun on his face.

The sun, hovering near the edge of the horizon, dyed Kojou’s visage red as he lay prone.

It took him a while to remember just what had happened. It’d been several

hours since he'd heard that Tooyama had taken Nagisa with her, supposedly heading to the MAR hospital, but Tooyama had disappeared, and even MAR did not know her whereabouts.

Left with no other options, he headed to the marina, only to encounter Veldiana bringing a passed-out Avrora with her. Then, her Beast Vassal had ripped his body to shreds, at which point his mind broke off.

“Am I...alive...?”

Kojou confirmed that his arms and legs could move as he forced himself to sit up. He didn't feel the anticipated pain from the injury. His bloody uniform was torn after the giant claw ripped it from the right shoulder to his left side. However, there was no wound. Instead, there was new flesh across his whole body, like what you'd find right after a scab came off, as if to prove that what had been destroyed had regenerated—

“So this is the power of a Blood Servant... Sheesh...”

*Gimme a break.* Kojou shook his head. Only then had it actually sunk in that he really wasn't a human anymore.

Strangely, it didn't bother him. That was probably because he knew there were things left for him to do. If he died, he wouldn't be able to rescue Nagisa and Avrora. When he thought of it that way, an undying body didn't seem like such a bad deal.

The problem was that he didn't know how far he could rely on “undying.” Regeneration had taken a good deal of time, after all, and it'd already been established that a vampire's Beast Vassal could kill him instantly. The ability wasn't actually all that convenient.

Veldiana was probably taking Avrora with her to see Zaharias. And when he considered the relationship between Nagisa and Avrora, the chances that Nagisa and Tooyama would be in the same place were high. After all, it wouldn't be strange for Tooyama, an MAR research and development division employee, and Zaharias, a weapons broker, to have something going on between them. For that matter, it was entirely possible that Tooyama was a spy in Zaharias's employ.

“The Blazing Banquet... No choice but to go, I guess.”

Kojou walked toward the connecting bridge leading off from Island East.

Zaharias had indicated that the Blazing Banquet would be hosted on Island Old Southeast. As the name suggested, it was a district of the artificial island floating on the ocean southeast of the Itogami mainland.

Originally, it was a prototype Gigafloat built for experimental purposes; later, the area functioned as a base camp for building Itogami Island proper. Many of its residents had directly contributed to Itogami Island’s founding, including city planners, construction workers, and the families thereof. Old Southeast used to be the beating heart of Itogami Island, but once the four Gigafloats were completed, covering north, south, east, and west, its role was complete; its population continued to dwindle as of late.

Due to being much smaller than the main Itogami Island with inferior facilities, and the Gigafloat itself butting against the end of its service life, a decision was made to dismantle it within several years, and it was now declared a condemned area.

It had become an old, filthy ruin of a Gigafloat—

Surely there was no more fitting place for Zaharias, a merchant of death, to use as the stage for hosting his so-called banquet.

There were two bridges connecting Old Southeast to Itogami Island proper, but most people would use the ferry. However, Kojou didn’t think that he could board a ferry in his current bloody clothes. Accordingly, Kojou’s feet were headed in the direction of the nearest connecting bridge.

Just when he caught sight of the entrance to the bridge, Kojou halted, noticing something was wrong.

“The Island Guard...? What the hell’s goin’ on?”

There was a small uproar around the connecting bridge. It appeared to be completely blocked off, with a barricade constructed out of armored cars. In addition, he could make out armed, mobile division troops and people wearing hazmat suits. The jarring sight reminded him of a city in a state of civil war.



“Advisory from the Gigafloat Management Corporation to all Itogami Island citizens—”

An unmanned public notice helicopter from the Island Guard circled overhead, approaching as if to address Kojou’s concerns. The indifferent artificial voice continued from the speakers of the small, radio-controlled drone.

“Today, a patient believed to be suffering from a new transmissible disease was spotted in Island Old Southeast. As a precautionary measure to prevent spread of the infection, entry into Old Southeast is prohibited until we are certain that it is safe to do so. The connecting bridges have been sealed.”

“What the...?”

As Kojou watched the remote-controlled helicopter fly away, his anxiety was accompanied by dizziness. With that timing, he surely wasn’t wrong to think that the “new contagious illness” was the same type that had occurred in the Nelapsi Autonomous Region. Zaharias was involved in both.

“Currently, all passage to Old Southeast by boat is prohibited. Furthermore, any vessels coming from Old Southeast are prohibited to dock and will standby offshore. Obey all instructions by inspection officials. Violators will be fined according to the law. Repeat—”

“Shit... A boat’s no good, too.”

Dumbfounded, Kojou stood rooted to the spot on the road, grinding his teeth loudly.

The transmissible illness wasn’t his only problem. Veldiana had surely already reached Old Southeast with Aurora in tow. If the connecting bridges were sealed, he wouldn’t be able to get Aurora back.

Stricken with despair, Kojou wandered around aimlessly. The next moment, a bicycle appeared before him—a hybrid bike in showy fluorescent colors.

“Whoa!”

The brakes let out a ferocious shriek as the bicycle stopped right on the verge of smashing into him. There wasn’t even five centimeters between it and Kojou, who was stiff as a board. He really had escaped by a hair’s breadth.

“...A-Akatsuki?!”

A girl in a track suit was riding the bicycle.

Her eyes widened in surprise when she saw Kojou covered in blood. Her long, slender limbs, well-tanned skin, and short hair suited her well. He remembered the girl from middle school.

“Ahh, you’re in the girls’ basketball club... Shindou, right?”

The girl on the bike turned out to be Minami Shindou, his basketball club junior from middle school. She was a year behind Kojou, but he remembered her face from when they’d discussed club business and the like.

“Akatsuki, how’d you get hurt like that...?!”

“Ahh, this. Don’t worry about it, it’s not as bad as it looks.”

“Uh, but—”

Naturally, Shindou found that hard to accept. He’d hoped he could hide it somewhat because it was evening, but Kojou’s appearance was apparently more grotesque than he’d appreciated.

“What are you doing out here, Shindou? You don’t live around here, do you?”

Kojou ignored his shaken junior’s concern and forced a change of subject.

Shindou seemed to blush a little as she smiled and pointed to the backpack between her shoulders.

“You heard there’s a victim of vampirism disease on Itogami Island, right? Well, Dad... My father is a technician for the quarantine inspection branch. He’s heading to Old Southeast to investigate, so he asked me to bring a change of clothes to the boat for him.”

“...Boat?”

“*The Ashvin*, the quarantine ship sitting over there.”

“Huh... That’s kinda rough for your dad, there.”

Even as Kojou expressed genuine concern for his junior’s family, his mind was preoccupied. Crossing to Old Southeast by boat was forbidden—but a quarantine ship with specialists aboard was an exception.

The crew of a quarantine ship rushed to the site of a sudden outbreak was unlikely to be on a tight lookout for stowaways. If he could sneak aboard the boat, it ought to get him to Old Southeast.

“Sorry for getting in your way, Shindou.”

Kojou waved to the younger girl and ran in the direction of the harbor.

“Ah... Akatsuki...!”

“Mm?”

Shindou called Kojou to a halt, her lips quivering as if she wanted to say something. In the end, she said nothing and merely lowered her head in a formal bow.

“No, it’s nothing. Ah... See you at school.”

## 6

Quartz Gate was a giant building located at the center of Old Southeast. The building’s main section was six stories tall; in the past, it served as Itogami City’s city hall and the headquarters of the Gigafloat Management Corporation.

The exterior liberally employed magically reinforced, see-through, diamond-hard glass, giving the entire building the appearance of a huge crystalline palace. A giant, hexagonal crystal clock tower decorated the center. It was the first magically constructed building in history, meant to broadcast the technology of Itogami Island, the Far East Sorcery Sanctuary, to the entire world.

However, now that Old Southeast was slated for dismantlement, Quartz Gate had also been abandoned. At present, it was an uninhabited ruin off-limits to ordinary residents. A beautiful, empty glass castle—

Zaharias had chosen Quartz Gate’s central plaza as the stage for his banquet.

At the center of the plaza, covered with a glass roof, twelve caskets were arranged like a fan. In half the caskets, six girls were asleep.

Hendekatos, Enatos, Ogdoos, Hebdomos, Deutra, and Protte—the six Kaleid Bloods in Zaharias’s possession.

Placed in the center between them was the gray-haired girl enveloped by a crystal gemstone. Zaharias gazed silently at her gaunt corpse.

The clock tower struck nine PM.

As if it was her cue, a quiet woman's voice could be heard.

"I am sorry to have made you wait, Count Zaharias—"

Zaharias slowly turned around. He was a young-looking man wearing a suit, a gray-haired youth in his mid-teens. The only feature remaining of the weapons broker were those sly, narrow eyes.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Miss Tooyama. And, Lady Nagisa Akatsuki, welcome to my Blazing Banquet—"

Zaharias had shifted his gaze to Miwa Tooyama of MAR and Nagisa Akatsuki, who was in her school uniform. The look on Nagisa's face wasn't exactly cooperative, but she wasn't tied up. Tooyama had probably used the threat of holding Nagisa's family hostage to get the girl to come along. The clear hostility in Nagisa's eyes as she gazed up at Tooyama was proof enough.

She looked at Zaharias and aggressively asked, "Who are you?"

Zaharias put a hand to his chest and bowed deeply.

"My apologies. I am Balthazar Zaharias, the Blood Servant of the Fourth Primogenitor."

"A primogenitor's...servant...?"

Nagisa acted resolute, but her eyes were clouded with fear.

Zaharias, too, had already learned of Nagisa's demonophobia. As she paled, Zaharias smiled to put her heart at ease and lowered onto one knee.

"I have no intention of harming you. Please do not be afraid, Nagisa Akatsuki. I am merely attempting to recreate the miracle that you yourself once performed."

"Mira...cle?"

"Indeed. Resurrection of the dead."

Zaharias raised up his face and nodded deeply. Nagisa could only shake her

head, unable to understand what was being said. Zaharias paused, narrowing his eyes.

“I see. First, let me speak of my birthplace. I was born in a small city on the Balkan Peninsula that no longer exists. In the past, it was wiped from the face of the Earth during a three-pronged war between the Warlord’s Empire, the Fallen Dynasty, and the Western European Church. It has been some seventy years.”

As he spoke, Zaharias looked at the coffin placed to his left. In that coffin slept the blond girl with a scar as if someone had ripped a hole in her chest.

“...It was she whom those launching the war were after. Protte—the first Kaleid Blood, sealed away in my homeland.”

“...?!”

Naturally, rumors of the Kaleid Blood, the World’s Mightiest Vampire, had reached Nagisa’s ears. The girl’s young face twitched in shock.

Zaharias looked with distant fondness at Nagisa’s reaction before shifting his gaze. He next indicated the gray-haired girl floating inside the gemstone.

“She is Valasta, my younger sister. She is also the priestess guarding Protte.”

Zaharias’s smile faded, and a faint glint of hatred arose deep in his eyes. He twisted his lips slightly.

“And the vampires killed her. I tried to protect Valasta, and was slain in the same place. And I alone came back to life. Valasta brought me back to life, as Protte’s Blood Servant—just as you did for your own older brother!”

“—Older brother? You mean Kojou?”

Nagisa spoke in surprise. The mention of Kojou’s name at that point had clearly shaken her. A faint, bitter smile came over Zaharias as he scrutinized her reaction, his gaze like that of a watchful snake.

“As I suspected, it seems you do not remember what you did. You transformed your older brother into a primogenitor’s Blood Servant—into an unaging, undying monster!”

“That’s...not true...!”

Nagisa ferociously shook her head as she shouted.

From her perspective, it was a natural reaction. Zaharias had just called her older brother a monster. A servant of the demons she feared.

“I don’t have the power to...do such a thing!”

“Yes. That is true. I understand that. No matter how excellent a priestess you might be, you cannot bring the dead back to life. That is possible only for the king of the dead, risen from the corrupted soil. A god-killing weapon that exists beyond all doctrines of the world. An artificially constructed vampire wielding an infinite negative life force—the Fourth Primogenitor!”

Zaharias spread both arms wide as he looked to the sky.

“Please, awaken thy power, the power of the complete Fourth Primogenitor. Fortuitously, I already have six Kaleid Bloods prepared—half of the Fourth Primogenitor prototypes. They have been filled with demonic energy from the human sacrifices of the Nelapsi Autonomous Region. Surely this is enough to rouse you from your slumber!”

“...Zaharias! ...I won’t let you do...any such thing...!”

Zaharias’s speech was interrupted by a vampiress in a bloodstained maid outfit. Her silky brown hair was disheveled, her eyes bloodshot with anger.

Then she placed before her a small blond girl she seemed to have dragged with her—Avrora, the twelfth Kaleid Blood.

“...Avrora...,” Nagisa murmured, staring dumbfounded at the frightened girl.

Nagisa had met Avrora before. Kojou had been the one to call Avrora over and introduce her. But Zaharias had said Kojou was a primogenitor’s Blood Servant.

Nagisa’s upper body swayed as if she was having a mild bout of anemia.

The image of Zaharias commanding Nagisa to awaken the Fourth Primogenitor merged with that of her older brother bringing her and Avrora together. *Why?*

*What’s happening...?*

*Who am I...?*

*Why is there a girl inside of me—*

*“My oh my, I have been waiting for you—”*

Zaharias broke into a broad grin as if a long-awaited guest had finally arrived. It was the face of a merchant happy that negotiations had gone according to plan.

Zaharias knew full well that Veldiana was trying to kill him, hence why he had sent Aurora the engraved invitation. Should Veldiana learn of the invitation's existence, she would most certainly bring Aurora to him, even if it meant defying that troublesome Death Returnee, Gajou Akatsuki.

Veldiana's thoughts and feelings had all been dancing on the top of Zaharias's palm. Even her anger and hatred—

“Welcome to my Blazing Banquet, Veldiana Caruana. I am exceedingly delighted that you have come all this way to bring me a seventh prototype. You have my sincere gratitude.”

“Silence!”

Veldiana summoned two Beast Vassals as she bellowed: a three-headed dog shrouded in fire, and a two-headed dog with freezing breath. They were the most formidable weapons in Veldiana's current arsenal. From that range, she could strike down the unescorted Zaharias with ease.

“Die, Zaharias! This is for my father and the suffering of my people—!” Veldiana shouted with a cheerful expression, certain of victory.

But Zaharias interrupted her declaration, full of confidence and indifferent cruelty. He went to Protte, lying amid the coffins, and took her hand as he quietly uttered a command.

“Come hither, Mesarthim Adamas—”

That moment, a huge Beast Vassal emerged out of thin air, apparently to guard Zaharias. The monster was so enormous, it barely seemed real—

It was a bighorn sheep with a body formed of diamonds. Thousands, then tens of thousands of gemstone crystals floated into the air around the Beast

Vassal, forming a shield to defend Zaharias.

“A Beast Vassal...of the Fourth Primogenitor?! No...?!”

Veldiana’s expression was dyed with despair as her Beast Vassals’ attacks were unable to even scratch the protective gemstone wall hovering in the air. Then, gemstones burst out like a hail of bullets, shredding Veldiana’s Beast Vassals, annihilating them without a single trace.

She’d known it from the start. Veldiana’s Beast Vassals could not hold a candle to a primogenitor’s power. She could not defeat Zaharias while he was protected by a Kaleid Blood.

“Avrora, please! I want you to lend me your power!”

Her back against the wall, Veldiana pulled Avrora to the fore against her will. Avrora did not move a muscle. She merely stood there, frozen to the spot.

“You can oppose even that Beast Vassal! Kill him! Kill Zaharias!” Veldiana screamed.

And then, suddenly, a large rose bloomed in her chest—but it was actually a spurt of fresh blood. Flesh scattered like petals, and Veldiana’s body wobbled.

“...Eeek...!”

Avrora’s cheeks twitched as warm blood bathed her entire body. Because Veldiana’s hand had released her, Avrora’s small body reflexively flopped to the ground.

“Zaharias...!”

Veldiana spewed blood as she glared at the arms dealer.

He gripped a small pistol. He’d no doubt used the firearm because he judged that Mesarthim Adamas’s might would have harmed even Avrora. Though it was a revolver for self-defense, the Silver-Elysium alloy round loaded in it had enough power to inflict a mortal wound on a vampire. For an arms merchant like Zaharias, obtaining highly valuable, special anti-demonic ammunition was child’s play.

As she continued to stand, more gunshots rang out. The five rounds fired sank unerringly into Veldiana’s chest. Veldiana dropped to her knees, and from



there, gently toppled to the floor.

“Av...rora.....why...?”

Veldiana murmured as her empty eyes looked up at the blond girl.

She moved no more after that. Drenched in fresh blood, Avrora simply stared, dumbfounded.

“Ah... Aaah...”

The whimper erupted into a great cry that was beyond any mere lament or angry shout—but the voice did not come from Avrora.

It came from Nagisa.

Clutching her head with both hands, she let loose a shout that seemed inhuman.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The air crackled and shuddered. The buildings of Quartz Gate swayed.

Not only Avrora, but even Zaharias gaped at the bizarre spectacle.

Only Tooyama retained her cool as she surveyed the area and exclaimed, “This is... All the Kaleid Bloods are resonating with one another...?!”

The six Kaleid Bloods lying in the coffins, all the prototypes except for Avrora, opened their eyes in response to Nagisa’s outpouring of emotions.

“Ohh!” shouted Zaharias, deeply moved. “So the true Fourth Primogenitor finally awakens! Marvelous! Marvelous...?!”

Zaharias’s voice, broadcasting his excitement, cut off like a thread suddenly snapped.

Globs of blood poured out of his mouth. The arms merchant’s body had been rent with a single horizontal slash, as if a giant ax had chopped him.

He blinked and gazed down at his two hands, smeared crimson with his own blood.

“...Wh...?!”

*Why?* Zaharias tried to voice, but could not, silently collapsing on the spot.

A wing had attacked him with polished bladelike talons and reddish-black blood vessels naked to the eye—a vampire’s wing.

That wing had assaulted Zaharias, cleaving his body in two.

Tooyama called out her name in a broken voice: “...Nagisa...”

Even her indifferent eyes were now distinctly colored with fear.

The black wing, teeming with demonic power, had spread from Nagisa Akatsuki’s back.

Her long, tied-up hair came loose, and she laughed.

Her eyes emitted a pale blue glow, blazing like flames.

## 7

Ordinarily, it wouldn’t take even an hour of walking to reach Quartz Gate from Old Southeast’s harbor. Yet on that one night, it took Kojou, transformed into a Blood Servant, over three times as long.

The outbreak was the reason why.

In under half a day, the vampirism disease spreading through Old Southeast had infected tens of thousands, and was well on its way to being a first-class epidemic. The infected had assaulted one person after another with inhuman athletic ability. Those who were healthy fled in panic. The Island Guard was working to halt the spread of the contagion—combined, the press of those forces made the area around the harbor very chaotic, requiring far more time to give them the slip than Kojou had counted on.

By the time Kojou arrived at Quartz Gate, everything was already over.

Or, perhaps that was when everything truly began.

All of it in a place beyond Kojou’s reach—

In the center of the plaza covered by a glass ceiling, two girls stood, illuminated by the light of the full moon. One had long, black hair; the other, blond hair that shimmered like a rainbow. Nagisa Akatsuki and Avrora.

“Avrora!”

Kojou rushed to the side of the vampire girl, rather than his sister, for two reasons. The first was the simple fact she was closer; the second was that Nagisa was clearly radiating a tremendous aura, a feeling of overwhelming pressure that would not permit a careless approach.

“Kojou...,” Aurora murmured weakly, welcoming the sight of his approach. She looked like someone desperately clinging to a little branch on a cliff.

“What happened?! Where’s Vel?!”

Kojou put both hands on Aurora’s narrow shoulders. Aurora let out a quiet “Eep!” and lowered her gaze to the ground.

Then Kojou saw it: Veldiana, bathed in bullets, bloodied as she lay on the ground.

Crouching at Veldiana’s side was Tooyama. She was supposedly an MAR physician, but she silently shook her head, as if to say, *I cannot treat this*.

“Tooyama...what happened here?”

Kojou asked in a low, suppressed voice. He hadn’t forgotten that she’d brought Nagisa there on her own authority. He couldn’t trust Tooyama, but she was probably the only one who could explain the situation.

“This is the Blazing Banquet.”

Tooyama herself gazed at the twelve coffins arrayed in a fan shape.

A giant crystal encasing a gray-haired girl had been placed at the center of the group. The sight was reminiscent of Aurora when she slept within the coffin of ice.

“It is the ceremony that Count Zaharias has conducted to awaken the Fourth Primogenitor. The general population of the Nelapsi Autonomous Region is some 2.6 million persons. Of this total, fifteen percent have already been changed into pseudo-vampires via the outbreak. He employed the demonic energy they provided to awaken the Fourth Primogenitor.”

“Then the infection happening on Itogami Island is...”

“Likely a side effect of the ritual spell. At the moment, it has somehow been confined to Old Southeast, but...”

Tooyama replied in a tone suggesting she was aware of everything. *Who the heck is this woman?* thought Kojou, such doubts seriously entering his mind for the first time. She was getting intel from off the island even while bringing Nagisa to Old Southeast. He'd suspected her of being with Zaharias, but that didn't seem to be the case.

"...Why'd you drag Nagisa into this? She shouldn't have anything to do with the Kaleid Bloods!"

Kojou pointed at Nagisa, who was laughing cruelly like a wholly different person, as he pressed the point with Tooyama.

Tooyama looked back at Kojou with a curious look.

"You did not realize?"

"Realize what...?!"

"That Nagisa was the Fourth Primogenitor. Not a prototype, but the real Fourth Primogenitor."

"What are...you saying...?!"

Kojou's voice went shrill at the wholly unanticipated words. With Nagisa's black hair fluttering under the moonlight, he felt like the darkness of her smile only increased.

Tooyama ignored the shaken Kojou and continued.

"Dodekatos, the Avrora you know, is nothing more than a watcher. *She* was not the entity the ruin on Gozo Island, the world's most ancient Demon Sanctuary, was meant to seal away."

"...Watcher?"

"Of the soul sealed within the ruin that is the true Fourth Primogenitor. The Cursed Soul, crafted by the hands of the three primogenitors with the cooperation of the Deva people—we have given her the provisional name of Root. Root Avrora."

"And this...Root Avrora is what's possessing Nagisa..."

Kojou felt like he'd finally pieced the story together.

At the same time, he knew he had miscalculated.

Kojou had been wrong from the beginning. He'd misunderstood. Even Gajou and Veldiana probably hadn't realized the truth.

Avrora didn't have amnesia. She hadn't known anything to begin with. She was an empty doll, built to protect Root Avrora. Or perhaps to monitor her.

As for why Avrora herself was sealed within the world's most ancient Demon Sanctuary on Gozo, alone among the twelve Kaleid Bloods—

That was because she was an observer.

That was the truth behind Dodekatos: a surveillance tool in human form to ensure the continued sleep of the soul of the true Fourth Primogenitor, Root Avrora.

Nagisa hadn't been possessed by a portion of Avrora's personality but by the soul of the Fourth Primogenitor itself. By extension, that made Nagisa, who'd taken that soul into her, the Fourth Primogenitor now.

From Kojou's blind spot, a blood-drenched Zaharias rose up from the shadow of the coffins placed in the plaza.

"I suspected...as much..."

His torso had a deep scar carved into it as if his body had been ripped in half. His injuries were severe, enough that no proper human would even have survived. Like a video playing backward in slow motion, his wounds slowly continued to heal, like a vampire primogenitor cursed with immortality.

Realizing he was looking at the man now returned to his youth, Kojou exclaimed, "You're...Zaharias? Why do you look like that...?"

Zaharias fought back the pain of his wounds as he laughed mockingly.

"Why are you so surprised, Kojou Akatsuki? You and I are the same, are we not...?"

"...The same? I see...then you were...a Blood Servant, too..."

Kojou clenched his teeth as he remembered how he'd been killed once already by Veldiana.

Zaharias chuckled, smiling in visible delight as he stood tall. He wiped away the blood trickling from the corner of his mouth as he shuffled toward Nagisa.

“If you are aware of it, that saves time. Now, Root Aurora. Please, bring Valasta, your priestess and my younger sister, back to life—”

“Thou art a foolish man, Zaharias.”

The voice came from Nagisa’s mouth, but it was not Nagisa’s voice. It was the voice of the soul dubbed *Root*.

The blatant scorn in the girl’s voice made the arms dealer’s face twitch.

“...Nn?!”

“I am the World’s Mightiest Vampire, a god-killing weapon built for the sake of The Cleansing. I am undying and indestructible. I have no blood relatives of my own, and I desire to rule none, served only by twelve Beast Vassals, the incarnations of calamity. I am she who drinks human blood, slaughters, and destroys. I am under no one’s control and serve no one.”

“You will not listen to my request...?! The request of your very own Blood Servant?! I, the Elector who offered sacrifices to you?!”

Zaharias desperately made his plea. However, Nagisa smiled coldly, as if she were looking at a filthy, noxious insect.

“Thou art a foolish man. Didst thou not slay the girl?”

“I...did...what...?!”

“To gain eternal life, this man sacrificed the nation of his birth and his younger sister to take my rib from Protte, and now he implores me to resurrect his sister? That is not thy sister’s desire, but thine own, is it not? Didst thou believe I would not notice the soul trap thou hast placed within Valasta’s flesh?”

“G...nn?!”

Zaharias weakly swallowed his words, no doubt because Root had accurately guessed his scheme. Her pale, glowing eyes turned toward the gemstone enveloping Valasta, and the coffin shattered. The body of the gray-haired girl was enveloped by light, crumbled to dust, and vanished.

It also meant that Zaharias's ambitions had collapsed. To Zaharias the arms dealer, even the corpse of her body was merely a tool—a resource with which to get his hands on *merchandise* of greater value.

“Filthy peasant. Thou learned of the existence of Nagisa Akatsuki, and this surely made thee jealous and envious. Furthermore, didst thou truly believe thou couldst have me possess and revive Valasta, whom thou believed was equal in power to this girl, so that thou might control the Fourth Primogenitor's power at thy pleasure—?”

“N...no. You're wrong... I merely prided myself on being the one who could raise your worth to the highest possible level...”

Zaharias's words, full of deceit, no longer possessed the power they once did. With no leg left to stand on, the arms dealer retreated a step, visibly afraid.

And to him, Root stretched out her hand—

“None lacking the will to fight is qualified to serve a god-slaying weapon. I take that power back from thee, Zaharias.”

“Eeek?!”

Zaharias's expression froze as he realized a new shadow had appeared behind his back.

There, cutting off his retreat was a blond girl with a deep wound in her chest, the Kaleid Blood known as Protte. Her pale, slender arm plunged into Zaharias's right side like a sharp blade. Kojou could hear the sound of a bone breaking inside the arms dealer's body.

Protte was ripping out Zaharias's rib.

“S...stop, don't... Protte...doooooooooon't!”

“Zaharias—!”

The girl pulled out her blood-soaked arm.

As Kojou and the others looked on, the arms dealer's body, robbed of the rib, rotted and crumbled away like chips of wood. His personal history in reverse.

Zaharias had received the demonic energy of the Fourth Primogenitor

through the rib. It had probably functioned much like an antenna. Robbed of that rib, Zaharias was freed of the curse of immortality. The time he had experienced flowed into his body all at once, destroying it.

Finally, the arms dealer's body had completely collapsed, leaving nothing but a tiny bit of black ash.

"Hmph," exhaled Root Avrora, unimpressed, before walking toward the coffins left in the plaza. As if to greet her, the sleeping Kaleid Bloods rose up one after another.

Even one as ill versed in magic as Kojou instinctively understood what it meant for the girls to come into contact. The awakened Root Avrora probably meant to take the Kaleid Bloods into herself so that she could regain her proper power. The power of the World's Mightiest Vampire.

"—Wait, Root!"

Kojou impeded the path of this being. He stepped forward, glaring at the black-haired girl from the front.

"Give Nagisa back."

"...Mmm?"

Nagisa, transformed into Root Avrora, looked at Kojou with her cruel gaze. Her blazing eyes could freeze a man's soul merely by looking at him. Even so, Kojou did not falter. If he let that moment pass, it would mean the eternal loss of any future for the being called Nagisa Akatsuki. That hunch spurred Kojou on.

"I don't care who you are or what you were built for, but that's Nagisa's body. There's no way you need it!"

"I see. Thou art different from Zaharias...though a fool nonetheless."

The corners of Root's red lips curled up in an eerie smile.

On the one hand, Zaharias had employed even the corpse of his little sister as a tool for obtaining the power of the Fourth Primogenitor. Kojou, on the other hand, had declared his little sister unnecessary for Root so that he could save her. She no doubt found the contrast amusing.

"Regardless, I shall not heed thy desire. My soul requires a vessel."



“Why’d you take Nagisa’s body?! Aren’t the Kaleid Bloods standing there your bodies?!”

“The Kaleid Bloods...?”

Root raised an eyebrow, as if annoyed by hearing a very bad joke.

“Were you not told? Kaleid Blood was the name of the project. Those created as part of that project are nothing but offshoots of me.”

“...Offshoots?”

“Man, fashioned in the image of God, has twelve ribs. And just as God fashioned Eve from Adam’s rib, from my twelve ribs were fashioned twelve components. Components serving as hosts upon which to graft Beast Vassals.”

“Hosts for Beast Vassals...?”

“Yes. False vessels so that Beast Vassals, summoned beasts from another world, may reside in this world. Dolls. Dodekatos, my watcher, is no exception.” The girl adopting Nagisa’s face lorded over Avrora, rooted in place, and smiled viciously.

Kojou merely bit his lip and gawked.

It wasn’t that he hadn’t imagined that possibility. After all, if the Fourth Primogenitor had been sealed away because she was too dangerous, why had she been split into twelve pieces?

Because the people of the Devas feared that she might rise again.

Therefore, they split apart and concealed the sources of Root’s power in every land. To ensure that the Beast Vassals serving the Fourth Primogenitor could not be freely summoned by her, each was granted a human body to tether them to the material world. The reason the Kaleid Blood project had produced man-made vampires was simple: Only within the body of a vampire could a vampire’s Beast Vassal be sealed away.



It wasn't that Enatos and Protte were controlling the Beast Vassals. They *were* the Beast Vassals.

"...So you're saying Aurora and the others are dolls controlled by the Beast Vassals, then."

"Indeed...thou art correct. In other words, now that I have awakened, their continued existence is no longer necessary."

The girl adopting Nagisa's form spread both arms wide.

With a flutter of her long black hair, giant wings with sharp talons sprang from her back. A vampire's wings—

There were six wings total, three on each side. The various appendages, writhing like snakes with their own wills, plunged into the chests of the six Kaleid Bloods. The reddish-black blood vessels on the surface of each wing began to pulse with powerful energy.

Hendekatos, Enatos, Ogdoos, Hebdomos, Deutra, and Protte—all six Kaleid Bloods were completely enveloped in light. They seemed to gently fade into the wings.

Root was reclaiming control of the Beast Vassals, parts of herself that had been forcibly ripped away. Via the annihilation of her components, the Kaleid Bloods, the true Fourth Primogenitor would awaken—

Kojou seemed beside himself as he stared at the incredible sight. "The wings'...colors..."

Nagisa's wings, previously pitch-black, shone vividly, changing to the various colors of the rainbow. Their faint, beautiful glow made him feel like he was watching an aurora.

Those wings stretched at Kojou like blades.

Root was not attempting to consume Kojou. Rather, her target was Aurora, who stood behind him. To Root, Kojou was nothing more than an eyesore and a nuisance to be mowed down so that she might regain the power of a seventh Beast Vassal.

However, her goal went unfulfilled.

Countless pillars of ice thrust up from the ground to protect Kojou, and the aurora wings bounced off them.

Avrora was the one controlling those pillars. For the first time, the twelfth Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor used her power of her own will—to protect Kojou and defy Root.

“...What is the meaning of this, Dodekatos?”

The girl taking Nagisa’s form glared at Avrora in displeasure.

Even as her legs trembled with fear, Avrora stepped forward, her eyes burning like flames.

Then, she spread both arms wide, shielding Kojou.

Even Kojou could not conceal his surprise at the girl’s unexpected action.

“A mere doll controlled by a Beast Vassal would defy me, its lord and master?”

Root’s dreadful aura grew even more oppressive. The demonic power became a gale, causing Quartz Gate’s glass walls to crack. But Avrora did not back down. She, supposedly a Beast Vassal’s puppet, was refusing to obey the Fourth Primogenitor, her proper host.

“Very well. Do make this amusing for me.” Root spoke with an expression of joy, like a child who’d gotten her hands on a new toy.

The aurora wings ran wild, lashing out at the surrounding area like enormous whips. They created an enormous tornado of demonic energy, shattering the glass ceiling, raining shards down upon them.

A pure flash of light transformed into fire, engulfing Kojou and Avrora as she shielded him.

“—!”

At that point, Kojou blacked out.

The last things he heard were the high-pitched laughter of the girl who had taken Nagisa’s form and the heavy tolls of the clock tower’s bell.

## *Intermission iv*

The chains...came loose.

The blond girl, her outline indistinct, glared at Natsuki Minamiya as she laughed ferociously.

Pitch-black wings of demonic energy sprouted from her back.

The wings totaled ten, five on each side. Each one became a huge sickle, slicing away the chains that restrained her movements.

“Fwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha...ha-ha!”

The girl with the ambiguous profile laughed, her blond hair swaying.

Her eyes, like pale blue flames, glared at Natsuki. Like whips, the wings at her back lashed out at the small witch holding the grimoire. Space itself seemed to ripple as Natsuki jumped away. She was teleporting using spatial control magic. The black wings speared through the place Natsuki had been a mere instant before, piercing nothing but her blurry afterimage.

“So that is how it is, Root Avrora—”

Golden chains under Natsuki’s control burst out of thin air, bearing down upon the girl like lances. When they circled around the pitch-black wings, the girl batted them out of the air. She’d predicted the paths of the chains and responded with an incredibly forceful attack. However, cold smiles came over both of their lips, their faces calm as the battle raged back and forth.

“No, that is incorrect... I shall call you *Logic Bomb*. A defense mechanism implanted within Root Avrora to protect secrets—a dummy program designed to indiscriminately slaughter anyone trying to access the secrets of the Fourth Primogenitor.”

Natsuki kept her eyes glued to the hazy girl as she spoke.

She was not the vestiges of Root Avrora’s soul, recreated by the grimoire. She was a magical virus packaged inside the Fourth Primogenitor’s Cursed Soul, a

self-destruct mechanism to annihilate any enemy probing her secrets.

“Thanks to you, Logic Bomb, we are now well aware that there are secrets to the Fourth Primogenitor unknown to us. Secrets that the Devas went through all this trouble to protect.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha... Destroy-destroy-destroy-destroy-destroy-destroy... Erase-erase-erase-erase-erase... Execute-execute-execute-execute!”

Hearing Natsuki’s murmurs, the girl increased the ferocity of her attacks.

The slicing attacks of the wings infused with dense demonic energy deeply gouged the thick stonework walls and smashed the ceiling. The excess energy sent tremors through the other-dimensional space, from which the Prison Barrier was constructed. If she persisted in her attacks, sooner or later the space itself would be destroyed; it was only a matter of time.

Yet, curiously, not a single thing inside the magic circle behind Logic Bomb was harmed. Within the circle, Kojou and Asagi continued to sleep, registering nothing.

It was not because the magic circle was protecting them; the girl meticulously avoided striking it. After all, the source of the very demonic energy she was using to attack came from within the circle. The source of Logic Bomb’s demonic energy was none other than the Fourth Primogenitor—Kojou Akatsuki.

“So she’s drawing demonic energy from Akatsuki...,” Natsuki murmured, exasperated. “That boy attracts some very strange girls.”

Even such moderated attacks by Logic Bomb, employing the inexhaustible demonic power of the World’s Mightiest Vampire, were overwhelming. Every one of the jet-black wings might have been on par with a primogenitor’s Beast Vassal.

Yet, Natsuki parried those attacks in stride.

It was not because the witch’s magical energy was somehow superior to that of the Fourth Primogenitor. Rather, Logic Bomb’s power was weakened. Like a bullet fired into the bottom of the sea, her demonic power was greatly diminished in strength. Logic Bomb’s present capacity was a far cry from her full strength.

“I told you... We are inside my dream. It permits me certain...liberties.”

Behind Natsuki, space ripped open, and a giant arm emerged. The limb belonged to a mechanized devil clad in golden armor. It grabbed hold of Logic Bomb’s wings and plucked them out with all the care of a roadside weed.

“Erase-erase-erase! Execute! Execute...!”

Having lost many of her wings, Logic Bomb retreated, facing the magic circle. She circled around Asagi, using her defenselessly sleeping body as a shield.

“I see. You intend to use Aiba as a hostage. Perhaps, I should say, such tactical decision-making capability should be expected of a legacy of the Devas?”

Natsuki’s brows rose in apparent admiration, but with Logic Bomb certain of her victory, the Witch of the Void also seemed a little disappointed. She shook her head.

“However, you were careless, Logic Bomb. Why did you think I went out of my way to bring in the girl from the Lion King Agency, unconnected to Kojou Akatsuki’s past?”

“Tch...?!”

For a moment, Logic Bomb slowed, seemingly unable to process the meaning of Natsuki’s words. Slowly, a figure rose behind her wielding a silver spear.

“—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee.”

With dance-like movements, Yukina Himeragi twirled the spear around as she intoned her chant.

Vast spiritual energy flowed into the silver spear, enveloping it in a faint white glow—the Divine Oscillation Effect, which could nullify demonic energy and rend any barrier.

“O purifying light, O divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your steel divine will, strike down the devils before me!”

“.....?!”

The pitch-black wings attempted to counterattack, but she sliced through them as if they offered no more resistance than warm jelly. The tip of the spear

thrust forward with ease, soundlessly impaling the girl's indistinct form, enveloping her in that dull, white glow.

That instant, just like that, the specter in the form of a blond girl dissipated and vanished.

After that, nothing remained except the now-decrepit building of the Prison Barrier, and the magic circle, devoid of light.

“Senpai really is a lot of trouble, isn't he...?”

Yukina gazed at the side of the still-sleeping Kojou's face as she made a weary sigh.

Losing his memory—fine. His demonic energy running loose—well, she could overlook that. Yukina had known from the start it was a dangerous ritual for him to relive the past; that was why she was on standby, after all.

Setting all that aside, Kojou's obsession with a girl from his memories, to the point of letting her absorb his demonic energy and use it as she pleased, left even her flabbergasted. There had to be limits to how much you indulged a girl.

It was indeed dangerous to take her eyes off him. Yukina resolved anew to watch him even more strictly than before.

“Well, she certainly raised a ruckus. This book has taken all it can handle, it seems?”

Natsuki gazed at the wrecked Prison Barrier building as she raised her voice in annoyance. The grimoire she held in her hand was giving off faint whiffs of smoke, unable to endure the magical energy. Its bindings were coming loose, causing the faded pages to fall loose and scatter. It could not endure the ripples of demonic energy used to maintain Logic Bomb in her physical form, and that meant the complete loss of a precious grimoire able to control another's personal history.

“Nevertheless, that is fine. At minimum, we have obtained information that we required.”

“Yes.”

Natsuki nodded. The Fourth Primogenitor, fashioned by the three



primogenitors and the Devas, indeed held hidden secrets. They still remained unknown to Kojou himself.

The Cleansing was the key to unlocking them.

Natsuki looked down at Kojou and Asagi, continuing in their harmonious sleep, and haughtily announced:

“—It is about time you awoke from your dream. Wake up, you two. Reality is waiting.”

The loss of the grimoire meant the dream Kojou and Asagi were watching would also come to an end.

Cutting off a memory before it had fully run its course probably meant it would become distorted and fragmented, with much of it sinking back into the realm of the subconscious, never to be remembered again.

On some level, this knowledge relieved Yukina, and that caught her by surprise.

Kojou was spending time with someone in a past unknown to her. Now that this obvious fact truly hit home, she felt a small throb deep in her chest. She dismissed this as a figment of her imagination, pretended not to notice the ache, and quietly closed her eyes.

The door of the Prison Barrier was opening, heralding the end of the past lost to them, and the arrival of the time to awaken—



CHAPTER FIVE  
THE TYRANT AND  
THE FOOL

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE TYRANT AND THE FOOL

#### *1*

His field of vision was shuddering slightly. As they passed over each seam in the road, the jolts seemed to toss the girl next to him in the air. A low noise, like an animalistic whine, was doubtlessly the sound of the vehicle's electric motor.

"This is...?"

When Kojou realized he was riding in the vehicle's cargo space, he slowly opened his eyes.

Displayed in his hazy field of vision was the landscape, scrolling beyond a window with narrow slits.

He was inside a vehicle encased in thick steel. He was sitting on a flat, uncomfortable seat, which contained dangerous-looking gear like electrified batons. He was apparently inside an Island Guard armored vehicle.

When Kojou abruptly glanced up, he saw a blond vampire hovering over him, visibly worried. Even though he'd seen many with the same face, he knew who she was from one glance at her eyes. It was Aurora.

"Heya, you okay...?"

"I-I am without hindrance."

The blond girl hastened to respond to Kojou's raspy question. She smiled in apparent relief, even though her clothes were a mess, covered in dried blood. Kojou was the same, though.

Apparently, both had been engulfed in Root Aurora's attack and had suffered grievous wounds, and both had regenerated after the fact. Had they been normal people, they would without doubt be dead.

No—even if they could regenerate, they surely would not have remained safe the way things were going. They could have been buried under a pile of falling rubble or attacked by the infected and eaten before ever returning to consciousness. Someone probably rescued Kojou and Avrora while they lay wounded, taking them out of Old Southeast.

Noticing that Kojou had regained consciousness, someone spoke to him. It was Miwa Tooyama.

“So you have come to?”

Her businesslike tone, weak on bedside manner, was the same as before, but her breathing sounded labored.

“...Tooyama, what happened? You’re the one who saved us?”

Kojou sat up, turning his eyes toward the voice. Then, his breath caught.

There were countless wounds over Tooyama’s entire body. They included severe burns and uncountable lacerations. She was covered in wounds to the point that it was hard finding a spot on her that wasn’t bandaged. All over the place, fresh blood was seeping into the bandages, dying them crimson.

“Tooyama...don’t tell me you got hurt like that for our sake...”

“First aid has been applied. It is no longer a problem.”

Tooyama spoke, interrupting Kojou’s shaking voice. Her firmly held belief shone in her eyes.

Tooyama was not motivated by greed like Zaharias, nor had she acted out of personal gain. Kojou was sure there was some kind of reason behind her incomprehensible actions.

“Who...the hell are you?!” Kojou gazed at the heavily injured Tooyama.

Kojou now understood that she was no simple doctor or researcher. No normal human lacking any combat capability ought to have been able to get out of Old Southeast alive while carrying the unconscious Kojou and Avrora, not with infected vampires all over the place.

“I am an Attack Mage of the Lion King Agency.”

Judging that there was no point hiding it further, Tooyama readily exposed her affiliation.

“Lion King...Agency?”

“A special agency established by the National Public Safety Commission. Please think of me as an investigator for stopping large-scale sorcerous terrorism and magical disasters.”

“So a special agent...?”

Tooyama’s explanation was one Kojou could sink his teeth into. He did think her aura suited an undercover investigator, and it explained how she could get her hands on an Island Guard armored vehicle.

“So MAR...and my mom knew about this from the start?”

“Yes. We have an agreement. In exchange for the Lion King Agency recognizing MAR’s ownership rights over the sealed Dodekatos, they would accede to a watcher who would provide them with information—and so far as this incident is concerned, our interests aligned almost perfectly with those of Mimori Akatsuki,” Tooyama replied nonchalantly.

In other words, Tooyama herself was the observer.

“If your interests are aligned, why’d you cooperate with a guy like Zaharias?”

Kojou hardened his voice as he pressed the point with Tooyama. Had she not dragged Nagisa with her to the Blazing Banquet, surely she would not have awakened as the Fourth Primogenitor.

“Of course, the objective was to awaken the Fourth Primogenitor,” Tooyama continued her explanation, her expression unmoved.

“I’m asking you, why?!”

“As I said, our purpose is to prevent disasters of a sorcerous nature.”

“That’s not an answer! What good does it do if you create the disaster?!”

Tooyama hesitated in silence for a moment, sighing as she shook her head. It looked like she was lamenting their own helplessness.

“In this case, our mission is akin to earthquake countermeasures.”

“Earthquake countermeasures?”

“The science of mankind is incapable of stopping earthquakes from occurring. Therefore, all we can do is to minimize the damage.”

“You call *that* minimal damage?!”

Kojou howled as he remembered the destruction Root Aurora had wrought. In addition, Zaharias’s ritual had caused an outbreak with hundreds of thousands of victims. Was she really going to insist that even this was damage on a reduced scale—?

“Our top priority is to prevent the influence of the awakened Fourth Primogenitor from spreading outside the Japanese homeland.” Even faced with Kojou’s accusing eyes, Tooyama spoke in a measured voice. She continued. “Just as Zaharias said, the Fourth Primogenitor is a weapon. Were a nation to obtain it, the global military balance would collapse. Accordingly, the only compromise that could be reached was for our nation, boasting specialized defenses, and its Demon Sanctuary at that, to obtain her.”

Kojou felt cowed by Tooyama’s unwavering gaze.

Like it or not, having witnessed Root’s power for but a single moment, the terror of the Fourth Primogenitor was carved into his being. Merely releasing her demonic power was so overpowering it had half-wrecked a giant structure like Quartz Gate. She possessed that shocking level of potential for destruction while having only regained half her proper strength.

Even all the top Attack Mages put together probably couldn’t hold a candle to her. It was a being humans could not equal, a strategic weapon—or a monster rivaling the armed forces of an entire nation.

Without fail, the existence of the Fourth Primogenitor would spark conflict. An emerging power like Nelapsi would gain the status of a new Dominion merely by inviting the Fourth Primogenitor in. That could easily result in a world war involving the Warlord’s Empire and the Fallen Dynasty.

No matter which nation or power obtained the Fourth Primogenitor, it would most certainly bring misfortune to the world—with the exception of a single safe zone: Itogami Island.

In a Demon Sanctuary, with all political use of demons forbidden as enshrined by the Holy Ground Treaty, the Fourth Primogenitor could be safely “isolated.” Nor was there any concern that the Fourth Primogenitor would rule Itogami Island herself and launch wars against other nations of the world. After all, Itogami Island was an artificial island constructed atop the Pacific Ocean; all one needed to do was cut off shipments of food and other necessities and it would shrivel like a prune. That was enough—at least, for appearances’ sake—to convince other nations afraid of the existence of the Fourth Primogenitor. Even Kojou could understand that much.

But that didn’t mean he accepted that the ends justified the means when it came to making that a reality.

“So that’s why you sacrificed the people of Old Southeast?”

Tooyama’s gaze shifted slightly at Kojou’s quiet rebuttal.

“Old Southeast, slated for dismantlement, has a daytime population of twenty-eight thousand people, which is five percent of Itogami Island’s total population. Compared to the damage in the Nelapsi Autonomous Region, one could call the damage moderate.”

“You can’t just...compare it with arithmetic like that...”

Kojou firmly brushed off Tooyama’s earnest excuse. She lowered her eyes, like it was hard even for her. Regardless, she continued frailly:

“It is not certain that all of those who have become pseudo-vampires will die. Over the course of several days, the infection will subside. This is because Root Avrora seeks not their lives, but their memories.”

“...Memories?”

Tooyama’s unexpected words made Kojou pause, thrown off a bit.

He could understand why the Fourth Primogenitor wanted human sacrifices for her survival. But the idea that she didn’t require lives, but memories, didn’t exactly fit.

“Did you know that in the world of magic, things are stronger the older they are?”

“...No. Is that so?”

“Yes. After all, among vampires, it is the oldest among them, the primogenitors, who boast enormous power. It is the vast personal histories that they, the unaging and undying, have accumulated that is the source of their might. However...”

“I see... The Fourth Primogenitor doesn’t have any of that...”

“Yes. The Fourth Primogenitor, one who was constructed, has memories, but...no accumulation of past history. Therefore, by consuming the memories of others, she obtains the demonic power required for her awakening.”

Kojou subconsciously looked at the side of Avrora’s face. Root had been sealed away with Avrora for hundreds—maybe thousands of years. Just as Avrora lacked any memory of her past, Root lacked a personal history as a source of demonic energy.

To the Fourth Primogenitor, built to be the World’s Mightiest Vampire, this was a fatal weakness; hence, why Root wanted human sacrifices to obtain the memories of others to use in place of her own.

“So that’s what the Blazing Banquet really is... Then, the people being sacrificed...”

“The persons concerned will surely lose many memories that they consider precious. Nor will we ourselves be exceptions to this.”

“What...?”

“Even if we are not pseudo-vampires, the human beings that come into contact with Root do not remember her because their memories have been stolen. In other words, memories related to the Fourth Primogenitor are mostly lost. The Fourth Primogenitor has remained a vampire myth because of her ability to exploit memory.”

“Then...everyone’s gonna forget about Nagisa? And Avrora, too...?!”

Kojou felt a chill run up his spine.

Those who had come in contact with the Fourth Primogenitor would forget about her—



If that was so, both Nagisa, who had become the Fourth Primogenitor herself, and Avrora, a Kaleid Blood, would be the prime victims. And Kojou had spent a great deal of time with both. Would it mean he would lose all those memories?

“Yes. I estimate it will occur some two or three days hence.”

Tooyama’s words mercilessly slammed into Kojou.

She continued, “Have you not noticed that both your parents, Professor Gajou and Chief Mimori, have each carefully avoided contact with Nagisa? Since they were working to save Nagisa, they absolutely could not afford to lose their memories of her. That is why they chose to live apart from her.”

“...What the...hell... Don’t mess with me here...!”

His father lived overseas for most of the year; his mother slept at work, rarely returning home. Kojou and Nagisa were used to that. They’d seen each of their parents as stuck in their ways and had given up; the two children were wrong.

Both their mother and father were always aware of the possibility that their memories of Nagisa might be taken away.

And Kojou alone was left out of the loop—

“Please do not find fault with your parents. They thought that even if your memories might be stolen, it would only mean you would not have to suffer. You would not have to bear the heavy burden of continuing to blame yourself for not being able to protect your little sister.”

“Do you think I can just accept that?!”

Kojou violently pounded the armored vehicle’s wall. Avrora yelped “Uu!” and cowered at the sound. Tooyama sighed softly as she watched the boy, painful and haggard.

“...These last three years, Chief Mimori exhausted every means available in her attempt to hold Nagisa’s debilitation in check. Only lately did she learn that Nagisa could be saved if the soul of Root was transferred to Dodekatos’s body instead. However, our attempt did not succeed.”

Only now did Kojou understand; of course it failed, for the simple reason that Avrora was Root’s watcher, a prototype constructed to seal her away and

prevent her revival. There was no way that Root, having finally escaped the seal by contacting Nagisa, wanted any part of returning to her slumber.

“Breaking the seal of Dodekatos, sleeping within the Fairy’s Coffin, was our final gamble. Nagisa had little time remaining. We thought that we might be able to transplant Root’s soul into an awakened Dodekatos, though this, too, ended in failure.”

“So you made Nagisa into the Fourth Primogenitor...?”

“Yes,” said Tooyama with a nod. “Even if she ceased to be human, even if she erased the memories of many people in the process...if she awakened as the complete Fourth Primogenitor, her safety would be assured... Also, the possibility that Nagisa’s soul could overcome Root’s was not zero.”

“...‘Cannibalism’...or overwriting her, yeah?”

“Correct. A vampire whose essence is consumed but who ends up taking over the being who consumed it. Normally, such a thing only occurs between vampires, but with both girls sharing the same body, perhaps... Though, the chances are despairingly low.”

Tooyama coldly conveyed the facts.

If Root did not dominate Nagisa, but instead the young priestess robbed Root of her abilities, then Nagisa would become the Fourth Primogenitor while retaining her own consciousness. Under the circumstances, it was the best result Kojou and the others could hope for.

Yet, without a miracle, it was a future that would absolutely not become reality. No matter how exceptional a priestess Nagisa might be, there was no way she could win against the Fourth Primogenitor’s Cursed Soul.

“...What are you gonna do about Avrora from here on?”

Kojou abruptly looked up, shifting his gaze to the blond girl standing at his side. Avrora was biting her lip and holding the hem of her skirt; she appeared to be wracked with guilt.

“The Kaleid Bloods taken in by the Fourth Primogenitor were the ones under Zaharias’s possession: Protte, Deutra, Hebdomos, Ogdoos, Enatos, and

Hendekatos. Once she fully acquires their rights of lordship, she shall surely come for the seventh—for Dodekatos.”

“So Avrora would end up being taken in, just like Enatos and the others...”

Kojou agreed with Tooyama’s guess as he painfully clicked his tongue.

On the inside, Kojou held a tenuous hope that being a Blood Servant would keep him from forgetting about Nagisa, but he’d been naive. Having so easily disposed of Protte’s Blood Servant, Zaharias, Root would probably see Kojou the same way—as excess baggage. Even if that wasn’t the case, Kojou would lose his qualifications as a blood vassal when Root took Avrora into her.

“One might think of Dodekatos as originally being one part of the Fourth Primogenitor. However, we believe it is desirable to use her as a bargaining chip.”

“...Bargaining?”

Kojou put his guard up as he glared at Tooyama. The thought of their plan to use Avrora stirred up distrust and annoyance within him.

Yet, even Kojou could grasp that logic. As she was now, Root wasn’t interested in negotiating for anything other than Kaleid Bloods, the keys to regaining her power.

“—We intend to negotiate a peace treaty with the Fourth Primogenitor. Envoys from the Warlord’s Empire and the Fallen Dynasty have already landed on Itogami Island, along with the remaining five Kaleid Bloods in their possession.”

“A peace treaty...huh...”

*I’m sure that’s their goal*, thought Kojou. From Tooyama’s position, working in a special agency for the government, maintaining national security was the top priority. If sacrificing Avrora by herself would achieve that, Tooyama would hand her over without hesitation. But...

“What if negotiations fail?”

“We shall destroy the Fourth Primogenitor.” Tooyama’s declaration came without the slightest hesitation.

Her scuffed-up cheeks warped as she smiled with pride.

“The Lion King Agency has a trump card that can destroy a vampiric primogenitor. *That* is why we were chosen to be the Bookmaker.”

## 2

Tooyama lost consciousness before they arrived back on Itogami Island proper. Her incredible willpower allowed her to feign that she was all right, but her body had reached its limit. Kojou and Avrora cut through the throng of Island Guard personnel transferring Tooyama to the hospital as they exited the vehicle. From there, they headed to Kojou’s home.

Most likely, the Island Guard hadn’t been informed whatsoever of Avrora’s true identity. Otherwise, there was no way they’d let the pair pass through without being tailed.

Most of Itogami Island’s residents were staying indoors due to the infection tumult, which was a stroke of good fortune for Kojou and Avrora. With no one to point out their bloody clothes, they reached the Akatsuki family apartment. And then...

“...So this is thy abode!”

After Kojou led Avrora through the living room, the girl’s inquisitive eyes glimmered as she surveyed the interior of his bedroom. The sight made him fondly remember how she’d acted after they’d met.

“Oh, right. This is actually the first time you’ve been in here.”

He’d never invited Avrora to his room before due to his fear of the consequences of running into Nagisa or Mimori. Now, he somewhat regretted that fact. *If she was going to be that happy about it, I oughta have brought her here lots of times*, Kojou mused.

“I-I smell thy scent.”

“Well, duh.”

As he gazed at Avrora burying her head into his bed, he forced a smile as he thought, *She’s like a puppy*. It probably wasn’t pleasant, and yet she did not

look bothered by it.

“And that is...?”

“Ahh, that’s Nagisa’s room. She’ll be pissed if you go in without asking.”

When Avrora pointed out the next room over, he replied and then gently bit his lip. He remembered that Nagisa might never return.

With such thoughts running through Kojou’s head, Avrora stared at him, smiling fleetingly.

“You have spent long months and years together.”

“Well, we are siblings.”

“Kojou.”

Avrora still sat on top of the bed, but she stretched her back up as much as she could to watch Kojou.

“...I ask thee. Wh-who am I?”

“Hm?”

Kojou looked back at the silent Avrora, not understanding. With an expression that lacked confidence, she seemed frightened as she continued.

“I am not a primogenitor. I am not a Beast Vassal. I have no memory, no soul. I have been addressed as a doll, a false vessel.”

“...You’re Avrora Florestina. You said it yourself, didn’t you?”

Kojou’s prompt reply froze Avrora. She averted her eyes as she forced a smile, threatening to burst into tears at any moment. As she did so, Kojou put his own palm atop one of her cool hands and held it tightly. Avrora’s blue eyes opened wide, meeting Kojou’s in visible surprise.

As usual, her fairylike beauty didn’t seem real. And yet—

“See, you’re right here, just like I am. Nothing’s changed at all. In the first place, even homunculi have been accepted as having rights equal to demons. Call yourself an artificial vampire or a Beast Vassal or whatever you want.”

“Kojou...”

A little sob escaped Avrora; it seemed she was so overcome with emotion that her throat had grown tight.

*Now I've really opened my big mouth.* Kojou grimaced and nearly blushed as he scratched his head. He went to the closet. Without fanfare, he dove in and pulled a paper bag out, tossing it at Avrora's chest.

"I almost forgot. Here, use this."

"...Attire...for me...?"

Avrora busily rummaged in the bag and fished it out: a brand-new sailor uniform, still wrapped in plastic. It was a Saikai Academy girl's uniform.

It was the same style uniform he'd given Avrora the day that they met. Unlike that one, this wasn't anything borrowed. The uniform was well and truly for Avrora.

"I had Asagi order it. Of course, I couldn't get you into the same school as us, so it's the middle school one. You'll be formally enrolled soon enough, so go ahead. Wear it."

Kojou stripped out of his bloody uniform and put a parka over a T-shirt. He'd have to cross open water. It was best to have more than one layer on his upper body.

"Stay in this room till I get back. I'll let Dad and Mom know. I'll borrow that boat for a bit in the meantime."

"...So you will go to her...to Nagisa."

"Yeah. At this rate, I'll forget about her, so I can't just sit and wait here like an idiot. Besides, no way I'm handing you over to Root. Well, I'll keep up the fight as long as I can."

He paused and gently placed a hand on Avrora's head.

Tooyama had said that Kojou would forget about Nagisa. Possibly, Root might come for Avrora before that. Kojou would lose a precious blood relative either way. As long as he sat and twiddled his thumbs, that fate was certain.

So he'd go on the attack first.

Kojou was a former basketball player. High-speed comebacks were second nature to him. He'd return to Old Southeast immediately. This time, he'd get Nagisa back.

The problem was, he couldn't think of a single decisive means of attack. After all, even if she wasn't complete, his opponent was the World's Mightiest Vampire. He couldn't possibly beat her in a straight-up fight. But—

“...Avrora?”

Kojou was a little thrown off as she suddenly began to rip apart the plastic wrapped around the uniform. Absentmindedly, he mused that she must have liked the uniform a lot.

“Wait, what are you doing?!”

Then, Avrora's next action jolted Kojou out of his stupor. She stripped off her clothes, even though Kojou was right there.

Ignoring the shell-shocked boy, Avrora slipped her arms through the sleeves of the uniform in earnest seriousness, leaving it unbuttoned in front. She let out a meek, little “Uu!” and for some reason, pushed out her chest.

“...I-I permit thee to fasten these abominable buttons!”

She addressed Kojou timidly. He was still working through his distress as he looked back at her.

“Don't tell me you're planning on coming with me...?”

His bewilderment was greater than his surprise. He was heading off to meet Root. And to Avrora, Root was higher up on the food chain. She was after the Beast Vassal sleeping inside of Avrora so that she could take it for herself. The next time the two girls faced off, the odds she'd be consumed like Enatos and the others was high. And yet...

“I-I shall grant thy wish...of salvation for Nagisa...!”

“Avrora... All right...”

Kojou realized what she was saying. There was one—and only one—means of attack remaining. One way to save Nagisa without letting Avrora be wiped out in the process.

It would put Aurora in danger. The odds of success were not high. Still, it beat the hell out of doing nothing save praying for a miracle. It was worth a shot.

“Let’s go, then.”

“I-indeed.”

Their hands seemed to find each other’s as Kojou brought Aurora to her feet. He straightened out her outfit before heading to the entrance.

Then Kojou stopped. At some point, someone had left a high-quality cardboard box outside the front door. He was pretty sure it wasn’t there when he and Aurora had arrived.

As he reached toward the box, he thought this was kind of creepy. The box looked suspicious; it had a whole bunch of international shipping stickers on it. *Well, it’s probably not a bomb at least*, he thought, vigorously breaking the seals and peering inside.

“...What the heck is this?”

Kojou became even more confused.

The contents of the box revealed a slender silver stake with strange characters engraved upon its surface—

And a metal cartridge with three stabilizer fins on it.

### 3

A strange group stood atop the anchorage structure of a suspension bridge.

One was a green-haired girl with amber eyes. Another was a tall, young man wearing a white coat. And there were three girls dressed in armor, all possessing blond hair that undulated like a blaze.

“So Zaharias is dead, and the Fourth Primogenitor has awakened—,” said the amber-eyed girl without hiding her displeasure.

She was the Third Primogenitor, Giada Kukulkin, also known as the Chaos Bride, ruler of her own Dominion.

The object of her gaze was Island Old Southeast. Via the magical ritual Blazing



Banquet, nearly twenty thousand souls had been transformed into pseudo-vampires, and the panic and mania still prevailed within the district.

On the other hand, the area around the artificial island's clock tower had returned to incomprehensible tranquility. None approached it, as if a majestic barrier had been deployed all around it.

Even the hyperviolent pseudo-vampires, bereft of higher reason, instinctively understood.

In that place, their sovereign had descended to Earth—

“It irritates me that everyone is dancing atop the Bookmaker's palm.”

Behind her majesty-filled voice, Giada pouted much like a child who'd had her favorite toy confiscated.

Root Aurora's awakening, her bringing the Beast Vassals into herself, Zaharias being killed at her hands—all could be tolerated. The number of outbreak victims was under half the hypothesized worst case. These were tiny numbers, not even approaching a tenth of Itogami City's total population.

She was not dissatisfied about that, but she could not conceal her boredom. To a primogenitor afflicted with the curse of never aging, never dying, the awakening of the Fourth Primogenitor was like the finest of wine, fermented over the course of millennia. One might call it the ultimate amusement left by the Devas, the ancient superhuman race destroyed in the distant past.

When Zaharias invaded the Fallen Dynasty, she had hoped this would get a little interesting, but when she opened the lid and glanced inside, she saw only a disappointingly neat and tidy resolution. This had left her in a sour mood.

As if to console her, the tall, young aristocrat boldly grinned. “There is no need to be so pessimistic at this juncture—”

“Of what do you speak, Vattler?”

Giada lifted an eyebrow and sullenly glared at the young aristocrat. Dimitrie Vattler dramatically shrugged, smiling at Giada as if to annoy her.

“The wild card the Lion King Agency overlooked appears to be on the move.”

“Mmm... Dodekatos's Blood Servant, then...”

Giada grinned as she gazed at a tiny cruiser moored at the harbor, her interest apparently piqued.

By all rationality, the vessel for a single Beast Vassal and her mere servant could never defeat the Fourth Primogenitor. Surely they fully understood the foolishness of their actions. However, should they challenge Root Avrora, an opponent they had no business defeating, it was worth seeing that choice through to the very end.

After all, such foolish actions were in the Fourth Primogenitor's true nature.

The Fourth Primogenitor was a deity-killing weapon, an anomaly built to kill an unkillable "God." If someone existed that could defeat the World's Mightiest Vampire, that person would truly be a rarity to defy all logic.

Giada continued to smile wryly beside Vattler, and her mood improved.

"Well, setting that aside, where do you think you're going...?" Vattler asked, glancing over his shoulder.

Behind him were the three girls clad in armor. Apparently walking in the direction of Old Southeast, they stopped as soon as Vattler posed his question.

Giada giggled in amusement and then exhaled.

"Tritos, Tetartos, Pemptos—so you would run loose as the Kaleid Bloods of the Warlord's Empire...?"

Vattler glared at the blond girls as a ferocious smile appeared on his face. His intense hostility froze all three girls stiff.

"You are bargaining chips for negotiations with the Fourth Primogenitor. You are free to sympathize with Nagisa Akatsuki, but I would prefer that you cease your nighttime frolicking."

"...!"

The three girls, shaking their heads in defiance, tried to summon their respective Beast Vassals, but before they could, serpents appeared out of thin air, entwining themselves around the girls' entire bodies.

When they gawked in shock, they saw a pitch-black vortex, shrouded in infinite night. The maelstrom, dozens of meters in diameter, was a collection of

thousands of intertwined serpents. The countless snakes wrapped around the girls as if intending to engulf them within the swirling mass.

Vattler stated, as if pitying the girls, “Unfortunately, you girls cannot defeat me as you are.”

The girls could not call forth their Beast Vassals due to the countless serpents devouring their demonic energy. Nor could the powerless girls shake them off by brute force.

Even in that life-and-death crisis, the girls did not lose their will to fight. Full of hostility, they scowled at Vattler, as their gazes seemed to command, *Do not interfere.*

“Ha-ha-ha-ha...! A fine show of spirit. That is why there is value in letting you go free.”

Showered by the girl’s hostile gazes, an expression of delight came over Vattler. He was grateful to the bottom of his heart toward the beings radiating such enmity toward him.

“If Grandfather had not forbidden it, I would find it amusing to consume you before the Fourth Primogenitor, but it is tedious to fight a battle I know I will win.”

Vattler released the summons of his Beast Vassal. The girls, freed from the serpents’ bondage, were launched into the air. Unable to break their fall, all three landed hard on the road, groaning painfully.

“Do as you like. Let us resume this once you have regained your proper power.”

As if to forsake them, Vattler turned his back upon the three. Giada watched him with deep interest.

“Hee-hee... What a pleasant man you are, Dimitrie Vattler... Thanks to you, it seems I shall be able to enjoy this banquet a while longer. I shall remember you.”

The figure of the girl with green hair faded and vanished, as if it had been swallowed into thin air. Vattler watched her go with amusement as he bowed.

“You honor me, Your Excellency—we shall meet again.”

Transforming into golden mist, he, too, vanished.

The spectators melted into the darkness as the banquet approached its conclusion.

## 4

The folded limbs opened, drawing a string taut, and the stock resembled that of a rifle. The folding fins of the cartridge fit neatly into the flight groove.

“Just as I thought...”

Kojou gripped the metal crossbow as he murmured.

It was the crossbow Veldiana had handed to him in the MAR medical wing. He’d completely forgotten about it, but the silver stake delivered to the Akatsuki residence was apparently a bolt meant for that crossbow. Or, it might be more precise to state that the crossbow was a tool meant to fire that stake.

“‘T-tis the Key to that accursed coffin.”

Avrora glared distastefully at the silver stake from a distance. There was a look of raw uncertainty in her eyes.

“You know what this is, AVRORA?”

“A primogenitor-slaying holy lance. It nullifies demonic power and may rend any barrier.”

“...I see... This is what Vel used to break the seal on you... Sounds pretty useful.”

Due to AVRORA’s typically grandiose manner of speaking, he wasn’t sure how much he could rely on her words. Even so, a stake that smashed the coffin of ice, half-wrecking the hospital building in the process—he thought it safe to assume it was indeed that powerful. Whether or not it was effective against Root AVRORA, he figured it might have some use.

Kojou folded the crossbow once more, sticking it and the stake under his belt. The tension around his waist made it harder to walk, but it was better than hauling it in a bulky bag.

“So...how do we get this boat moving, anyway?”

As Kojou spoke, his gaze shifted to the helm of the cruiser.

This was *The Liana*, which Aurora and Veldiana had used as their home. With the connecting bridges now sealed, they had no way to cross to Old Southeast except getting that boat moving.

Regardless, Kojou naturally had neither a boating license nor any experience steering a boat whatsoever. The area around the steering wheel was filled with instruments and levers he'd never seen before; to be blunt, he was at a total loss. The user's manual was all in a foreign language, so he didn't have the faintest idea what was written in it.

“—Th-this product of iron culture is beyond my understanding.”

Aurora was just as confounded as he was. She'd only slept on the boat. She'd never seen it actually piloted even once. Since it'd been sitting there for over half a year, Kojou wondered whether the engine would even start. But...

“My goodness, you make a sorry sight. Did you really think you could make it to Old Southeast like this?”

They suddenly heard a voice with a bitter laugh. Kojou and Aurora turned around in surprise.

There stood Veldiana Caruana. The brown-haired vampiress was wearing blood-stained clothing as she limply reclined against a pillar on the deck.

“...Vel...?! You're alive?” Kojou stared in astonishment.

Even with the woman herself in front of him, he couldn't believe Veldiana had made it out of Quartz Gate alive after suffering such serious injuries.

“Do not underestimate a vampire's life force. It'll take more than that to kill me.”

Veldiana spoke in a strong voice that suited her proud personality, yet it was clear that she was weak. Her lips were pale, and she could not stand without something to support her. It looked like it took everything she had just to remain conscious.

“...Veldiana...thy spring of blood is already...”

“It’s all right, Avrora. I’ll be all right.”

As Avrora addressed her in a trembling voice, Veldiana gently shook her head.

“Zaharias is gone. What do you want with Avrora now?” Kojou asked in a low voice, having recovered from his initial surprise.

It wasn’t that he was unhappy Veldiana was alive, but she’d tried to kill Kojou, so he harbored a grudge. Furthermore, he hadn’t forgotten how she’d dragged Avrora away against her will.

“...I will not say I desire forgiveness. I could not excuse Zaharias for what he had done. I thought, if I could kill him, losing everything was fine, but...”

Veldiana squarely met Kojou’s glaring eyes and smiled weakly.

“But once I learned that I was only being used by Zaharias and Nelapsi, I lost my way—what I’ve lived for until now... Therefore, I can at least see this through to the end.”

“...You’re going to get us to Old Southeast?”

Once Kojou understood what Veldiana was implying, he felt conflicted. It wasn’t that he doubted her. Even when she’d absconded with Avrora, even when she’d flown off the handle, it just wasn’t in Veldiana’s nature to deceive others. He was grateful for her proposal, simple as that. It was her wounds that worried him.

“At the very least, I can steer better than you two.”

“But you’ve lost so much blood...”

“There’s no time, is there? If we flounder around, you’ll lose your chance to save Nagisa.”

Veldiana’s words silenced Kojou. She seemed well aware of just what he and Avrora were trying to do.

“...I permit it.”

In place of the hesitant Kojou, it was Avrora who murmured. She gently handed Veldiana the key to the cruiser that she’d been holding.

“Leave it to me.”

Veldiana took the key and wobbled her way to the boat's helm, sitting before it. With an unpracticed hand, she started the engine, switched on the headlights, and made the other preparations for departure.

"The rope?"

"I pulled it aboard just now."

"Okay. Let's go, then!"

Veldiana, speaking with an oddly enthusiastic tone, roughly operated a lever. Instantly, the boat moved in an unexpected direction, slamming right into one moored beside it.

"Hey...Vel?! Can you really steer this thing?!" Kojou shouted, dangerously close to being tossed off the deck.

Avrora desperately clung to the guardrail, her face blanched.

"It's just a little bump. As long as we don't sink, it's all good!" Veldiana retorted, agitated, as she spun the wheel hard. The boat emitted a disagreeable sound as it turned, somehow moving out of the marina.

The shaking was a lot worse than Kojou had expected. It wasn't so much that the ocean waves were high as the simple fact that Veldiana was bad at steering. Even so, she got the hang of it later on, brought the wobbly boat under control a bit more, and accelerated toward Old Southeast. Even though it hadn't had any maintenance to speak of, the boat wasn't in bad shape at all.

Fortunately, since passage by boat was prohibited, no one else was in the water. If not for that, they might have smashed into another boat and ended up in Davy Jones's Locker.

However, as their boat ride continued, Old Southeast came fully into view and signaled the end of their good fortune. Noticing that Kojou and the others were approaching without permission, black-painted patrol boats converged on them.

"Vel, it's the Island Guard!"

"We'll break through! Hang on tight!"

Veldiana opened the engine to full throttle, paying no heed to how high the

boat leaped. Since Veldiana was unafraid of collisions, her reckless piloting gave the Island Guard a hard time.

—But only for a moment. The patrol boats, getting back into formation, turned as a coordinated group. They approached Kojou and crew, pressing upon them from right and left. Suddenly, pale sparks scattered up onto the boat. A bullet had flown toward them, ripping through the darkness, kicking up droplets of sea spray from the water’s surface. Commands to stop their boat issued over speakers, mixing with the echoes of ceaseless gunfire.

“—They’re shooting at us?! Seriously?!”

“I-it’s just warning shots, right?!”

“Nah... They’re probably aiming for the engine! They’re trying to stop us so they can arrest us!”

While Kojou and the others wavered, the patrol craft tightened the distance. The accuracy of their automatic weapons increased, ripping a hole in *The Liana*’s side. It was just a matter of time until they were dead in the water.

“—Please, Ganglot!”

Nervously, Veldiana stood up from her seat and abruptly summoned a Beast Vassal. The three-headed dog, manifesting above the sea, pounded fire onto the surface of the water before its paws; the shock wave put plenty of distance between them and the patrol craft.

“What the—?!” Kojou’s eyes snapped wide as he shouted. “Are you nuts?! You’re using a Beast Vassal on the Island Guard?!”

“Well, we’d never have gotten away if I hadn’t!”

“I’m a felon now... They’ll kick me out of school.”

He uttered the words without thinking; then he suddenly broke into laughter. Here Kojou was, challenging the World’s Mightiest Vampire to battle. He didn’t know if he’d make it back alive. That he was still worried about school struck him as funny.

“This is fun, huh, Kojou?”

He saw that Veldiana was laughing, too. She seemed to have lost her



obsession. The side of her invigorated face was smeared with blood, and she was in pain, but she looked like she'd never been happier in her life.

"I really am having fun. I was afraid to admit it until now, but meeting you and Aurora, the time I've spent living on Itogami Island, I've had fun. I should have accepted that much sooner."

"Vel...don't tell me that...," Kojou blurted out, staring at Veldiana's beaming expression.

The Beast Vassal she'd summoned faded away, leaving a pale glow behind. Cut off from Veldiana's supply of demonic energy, it was unable to maintain a physical form.

As Veldiana gripped the steering wheel, her body was shrouded in silver mist as it broke down bit by bit. She couldn't maintain her form, either. Her body had already sustained a mortal wound from Zaharias's gunshot. The life that she'd stubbornly clung to using her demonic energy was petering out.

The shore of Old Southeast was coming into view. It was less than several hundred meters away. But the boat had stopped short of that, its engine killed by Island Guard gunfire.

Kojou violently pounded the boat and exclaimed, "Shit... After coming this far...!"

Just a little farther and they would have made it to Old Southeast. If the Island Guard put them in handcuffs, this time they'd completely lose all opportunity to rescue Nagisa.

*What should we do?* Kojou clenched his fist once more. When he did, a tiny hand, cool to the touch, embraced it with fleeting strength.

"Kojou, take my hand..."

"Aurora?"

Kojou firmly took the blond vampire girl's hand into his, their fingers intertwining. Then, the girl thrust their hands toward the surface of the water.

He felt heat in a rib on his right side as her thoughts and demonic power flowed into it.

Then, a great chill was unleashed.

The sea was dyed pure white, with their boat at the very center. The water surface froze solid, its waves intact. The cold was overwhelming, beyond even the freezing magic of sorcerers of the highest caliber—

This was the power of a Beast Vassal. The power of one of the Fourth Primogenitor's twelve Beast Vassals, sealed in its vessel, Avrora. That is what this girl unleashed.

When Kojou looked back, his eyes wide in surprise, Avrora was smiling, and she seemed ready to cry.

“Kojou, take Avrora's aid and go...! Quickly...!” Veldiana insisted, still squatting limply on the deck.

He nodded without a word and led Avrora off the deck by the hand.

The surface of the sea was completely frozen. The ice was probably several meters thick. If they advanced on top of it, Old Southeast would be right there.

Avrora looked back at Veldiana and shouted, “...Th-thank you, Veldiana!”

Veldiana gently watched her go before closing her eyes.

“That's my line... Avrora...thank...y...ou...”

A satisfied smile came over Veldiana as silver mist enveloped her entire body.

Softly shimmering under the moonlight, the mist finally melted into the darkness, rode a quiet breeze, and vanished.

## 5

Avrora's chill reached even the coast of Old Southeast, dyeing the surroundings white. It was a beautiful sight, but Kojou had no time to take it in.

“.....”

There were numerous human silhouettes on the beach. Nearly all were infected pseudo-vampires. Even just the ones within his field of vision numbered over a thousand.

About 80 percent were wandering around the island in search of new

sacrifices, but the remaining 20 percent were curled up on the beach, unmoving. Their powerless eyes remained open, displaying no emotion. Kojou knew the cause. Their memories had been taken by the Fourth Primogenitor—Root Avrora. With their memories ripped out, they didn't even have the will to live, so they simply stayed there in a daze, waiting for death.

This was what it meant to be a human sacrifice to the Fourth Primogenitor. This was the reality of the Blazing Banquet.

“...So all of 'em are pseudo-vamps...”

Noticing Kojou and Avrora's approach, the pseudo-vampires, spurred by the urges of the infection, converged their gazes as a group. There were hundreds of infected still able to move. However, the physical capabilities of the infected didn't hold a candle to those of a Blood Servant like Kojou. It seemed they'd have to break through the encirclement to meet with Root again.

That said, Avrora couldn't exactly use her Beast Vassal; it was simply too powerful. If she summoned it in this circumstance, it would mean the slaughter of over a thousand infected.

“...N-no hindrance. There is no need for concern.”

With Kojou hesitant, Avrora walked forward, pulling his hand along.

When the infected saw her, they wavered. With each step Avrora took forward, the human wave parted, making her a path.

As sacrifices to the Fourth Primogenitor, they were unable to attack Avrora, who was a part of her, even though her timid, quivering demeanor was nothing like a princess's majesty.

“Where is Nagisa?”

Slipping past the pseudo-vampires' encirclement, Kojou and Avrora headed toward Quartz Gate. As Kojou half expected, there was no sign of any human presence around the half-wrecked glass castle. The barrier around the altar for the Blazing Banquet was still intact.

“O-over there!”

Avrora was pointing toward the tall clock tower that resembled a hexagonal

crystal. At the top of the tower, Kojou could see the girl who'd adopted Nagisa's appearance wearing an arrogant expression as she seemed to sneer down at the entirety of the world.

Kojou stood in the plaza buried in rubble, stared up at her, and shouted:

"...Root!"

As if on cue, the clock tower's bell began tolling, low and heavy. It was like the peals were greeting Kojou and Avrora for a funeral.

Root coldly gazed down at Avrora.

"So you have returned, Dodekatos. I had thought you would be pathetically trying to flee in a panic."

As Avrora's hand quivered in apparent fear, Kojou strongly squeezed it and stepped forward.



Then, he looked up at the black-haired girl and commanded, "Root Avrora... give Nagisa back!"

"The servant of a doll dares to give me a command?" the girl in his sister's body murmured, somehow beside herself at this. Then she smiled, beautifully and coldly.

"'Tis fine. Servant, thy labors have made Dodekatos grow well."

"...Grow?"

Kojou stole a glance at the side of Avrora's face. It was impossible for a vampire's unaging, undying body to grow in a mere six months. As a matter of fact, Avrora looked exactly like she did on the day Kojou had met her.

"Memories lacking strong emotions are akin to watered-down wine. The memories provided to me by the human sacrifices are insufficient. During the time of my long sleep, compelled by that abominable seal, the Beast Vassals were granted vessels in the forms of persons and scattered around the world. But for what purpose?"

"...So that they could get their own personal histories, huh?"

Kojou instantly replied to Root's question. Perhaps she found that unexpected, because the girl taking the form of Nagisa nodded in apparent delight.

"It is so. However, the mere prolonged passage of time is meaningless. 'Tis the accumulation of powerful emotions and feelings that lends Beast Vassals strength. Feelings strong enough that they would defy even me, their host."

"....."

Avrora did not avert her eyes in fear, continuing to stare straight at Root.

Beast Vassals were sentient masses of demonic energy, beings summoned from another world. And in turn, the twelve dolls built as vessels for those Beast Vassals were granted free will. The sealed Beast Vassals resonated according to the dolls' emotions, and those emotions became power.

Obtaining emotions strong enough to defy the host meant that her Beast Vassal had grown in power; hence, why Root was delighted that Avrora was

defying her. After all, an increase in the Beast Vassal's power meant an increase in the master's—Root's—as well.

“However, your duty is at an end, servant. Leave Dodekatos here and go.”

The girl taking the form of Nagisa shifted her gaze toward Kojou, looking at him like he was an annoying ant. Her eyes communicated that she was only letting him go on a whim.

Yet, Kojou locked eyes with her, murmuring with a heavy sigh, “Shut up already.”

“...What?”

Root's face twitched at Kojou's improbable reaction.

He grabbed the crossbow hanging from his hip and spread out its folded limbs. With a Blood Servant's physical strength, he pulled the string taut one-handed, loading the cartridge with the silver stake into the crossbow.

“I said it once already. Give Nagisa back.”

Kojou trained the crossbow on Root, crudely baring his canine teeth as he smiled.

“I'm taking her back. I don't care if you're a god-killing weapon! This ain't just for Aurora's sake, or for Nagisa's—from here on, this is *my* fight!”

“So that is thy desire, filthy servant...!”

Root howled in response to Kojou's challenge.

Even if Root considered him an underdeveloped Blood Servant, she hadn't thought a lowly human would pick a fight with her since the day she was constructed. Naturally, she was indignant.

Wings the color of an aurora sprung from Root's back one by one, until a giant, illusory beast had formed. Her upper body was a beautiful woman; her lower body, an enormous serpent. Her flowing hair was composed of countless snakes. She was a pale, watery Undine—a naga.

“A Beast Vassal!”

Mere contact with the water droplets from the mermaid broke the rubble of

Quartz Gate down into sand.

Kojou was aghast at the bizarrely destructive spectacle. Bathed in the mermaid's attack, the glass reverted to silica, water, and carbon; the concrete, into clods of earth. Then, the steel girders, wrought by the hands of men, returned to their former state—deconstructed down to the atomic level. Root's Beast Vassal was a monster that seemed to roll back time itself, reducing civilization to nothingness.

Even an unaging, undying vampire would surely be annihilated without a trace if it touched that naga. It wasn't something Kojou could take on by himself. Certainly, on his own, he—

"Kojou!"

Avrora thrust her right hand forward; Kojou grasped it. As they reached out, they shouted in unison:

"C'mon over—Alrescha Glacies!"

This time, the Beast Vassal sealed within Avrora fully revealed itself.

It was beautiful, short of ten meters in length. The upper body resembled a human female, but the lower half had the body of a fish. Transparent wings sprang from her back; the nails on her fingertips were like sharp claws.

The enormous cold that served the monstrous avian—perhaps an icy mermaid, perhaps a Siren—collided with the torrent that surrounded the naga.

The cold froze the ferocious maelstrom, and the ice became water again. The two Beast Vassals' abilities were equally matched. But the aftershocks of the vast demonic energy alone made the artificial ground of Old Southeast shudder.

"So my Beast Vassal follows a mere servant?" the girl taking Nagisa's form murmured in ridicule. Her fiery eyes glimmered as the wings on her back glowed brighter in turn. "However, it is for naught. Your defeat is inevitable."

Using three of her aurora wings, she summoned three new Beast Vassals. One was a divine sheep with a body of diamonds; another was a giant, amber-colored minotaur; and the third was a scarlet bicorn that wavered like a mirage.

The divine sheep covered in countless gemstones fired the jewels out like



shrapnel. The icy, monstrous avian, continuing to battle the naga on equal terms, had no opportunity to respond. Under the deluge of gemstone bullets, it wavered heavily; Avrora exhaled in anguish.

“Return to me, Dodekatos. The banquet draws to an end—”

Root commanded the next Beast Vassal to attack. The amber minotaur shook the ground as it hoisted its giant battle-ax high. The battle-ax glowed from the incredible demonic energy with which it was imbued. It, too, must have been some kind of special offensive power.

The target of the minotaur’s attack was not the avian creature, but Kojou and Avrora. Even had the battle-ax been normal-sized, they would not have escaped unscathed, but the monster’s body was over ten meters tall, with the ax it had swung high more enormous still. Even without a direct hit, the shock wave alone would surely turn them into mincemeat. With their Beast Vassal already occupied, Kojou and Avrora had no means to resist it—

“What?!”

It was neither Kojou nor Avrora who let out a voice of surprise, but Root.

*Boom!* An incredible roar shot above Kojou’s and Avrora’s heads. It was a bullet formed from an incredible shock wave that rivaled the explosive pressure of a thermobaric bomb. The supersonic impact scored a direct hit on the minotaur’s body, sending it flying dozens of meters away.

“Wh... Why dost thou defy me, Enatos...?!”

The girl taking Nagisa’s form furrowed her eyebrows in anger as she shouted. She was glaring at the deep scarlet Beast Vassal she herself had summoned, the bicorn with its entire body shrouded in incredible vibrations. It had unleashed a shock wave, attacking the minotaur, and saving Kojou and Avrora in the process.

Avrora’s breath caught as she gazed up at the huge, majestic bicorn.

“Al-Nasl Minium...”

“That’s...Enatos?”

As if to shield the two, the deep crimson Beast Vassal landed and glared at the

minotaur. Kojou gazed at the sight, shaking his head in amazement.

“Don’t tell me...you’re paying me back for the ice cream?! For that tiny little thing?!”

The bicorn looked back at the surprised Kojou... He felt like it was giving him a smug smile.

Seeing that, Kojou remembered. The Kaleid Bloods, built to be vessels for the Beast Vassals, had free will. Furthermore, the Beast Vassals resonated according to the girls’ emotions.

With those feelings, Enatos had chosen Kojou. She had chosen to protect Kojou, not Root, her proper master.

It was powerful emotions piled atop one another that increased a Beast Vassal’s power; feelings powerful enough to turn one against its master—Root had said so herself.

“Very well, Beast Vassals. Then show me how well you protect your precious servant!”

Root Avrora, standing on top of the block tower, stretched a hand high toward the sky above. Kojou, sensing something strange far above his head, instinctively looked up.

“What the—?!”

There, he saw a falling star: a huge meteor enveloped by incandescent flames. Even though it was still above a cloud, he could clearly make out its form with the naked eye.

The “meteor” was actually a giant weapon: an ancient armament known as a Vajra sword, a sharp, demon-slaying blade said to be used by the gods. The enormous blade easily surpassed a hundred meters in length, but it was falling from the sky, pulled by gravity thousands of meters from the ground.

Kojou was afraid to even imagine the destruction of its impact.

Avrora’s expression froze over as she intoned its name.

“...Kiffa Ater!”

Even during that time, the Vajra sword's speed increased, and the distance between it and the ground shrank.

"You're...kidding. That's a Beast Vassal, too...?!"

Kojou's face contorted in despair. He was aware of Beast Vassals known as Intelligent Weapons. However, that black sword was far beyond that scale; a far more suitable name would be The Judgment of God.

The fall of a Sword of Judgment would surely inflict lethal damage in a radius of tens of kilometers—a simple ability, one specialized for destruction. That made it all the harder to defend against. Even with the aid of the icy avian and the bicorn's strength, could they really intercept it?

Those two Beast Vassals had their hands full holding Root's other Beast Vassals at bay, anyway. Kojou and Aurora were out of options.

The Sword of Judgment accelerated, as if aware of Kojou's unease. The air eerily vibrated. The glowing sword hurtled toward them from above, making the sky as bright as the sun at high noon.

That light was falling. It was as if the very sky was crashing down upon their heads—

Having come that far, it was only a moment before it reached the ground. And yet, the feared moment of destruction for Itogami Island never arrived.

"Wha...?!"

Kojou felt as if he clearly made out Root's voice, shouting in astonishment.

At first, there was only a golden glow.

A huge lion of lightning emerged from a spray of gold-colored thunderbolts, and the Beast Vassal of the same color faced the falling black sword and roared. The incredible thunder shot out from the surface changed shape into an enormous electromagnetic field covering the sky above Old Southeast.

As the sword plunged into the field, its velocity created a powerful magnetic field of its own.

The lightning lion unleashed another thunderbolt. The sudden change to the field launched the Sword of Judgment away.

Kojou realized that the sword, falling due to the pull of gravity, had been smacked away by the physics of electromagnetic induction.

Having been given a new vector, the sword shifted its angle. It was no longer falling, but rather slicing through the air toward the horizon, and it vanished.

It would fall to earth no more, but that did not mean the shock wave it created had been completely eradicated. The delayed shock wave reached the ground, landing a direct hit on Old Southeast.

The force was not as great as the falling sword itself, but it possessed more than enough destructive potential to pulverize the Gigafloat's foundation.

The surface of the ground, covered by resin and metal, caved in. Even its deepest depths underground were laid bare in one blow. The Gigafloat's mainframe was severed, and the entire island began splitting apart left and right. Every glass window on every building shattered, and buildings collapsed one after another. It all happened in an instant.

Old Southeast did not immediately sink, for the design of the Gigafloat was fundamentally sound. Even so, every internal block of the island had begun to flood. The island would sink; it was just a matter of time.

Despite all this, Kojou and Avrora, who were at ground zero, were unharmed.

They had been saved by a silver mist. The dense fog, springing up beneath the Sword of Judgment's fall, had enveloped their bodies and protected them from the explosive impact.

Root, standing on the tilting clock tower, spoke bitterly as she gazed at the ground.

"You two are...!"

The lion shrouded by lightning, and the silver, carapaced beast enveloped in deep mist—

The two Beast Vassals that had protected Kojou and Avrora from the Sword of Judgment glared at Root with naked enmity.

Avrora shouted the Beast Vassals' names with surprise. "Regulus Aurum...! Natra Cinereus...!"

“What’s goin’ on here?” Kojou was thrown for a loop. Why were Beast Vassals they didn’t know helping them out—?

Kojou gasped and looked up at Root. At the girl taking Nagisa’s form.

“Nagisa...?! They’re trying to save Nagisa, too?!”

There was only one reason that Beast Vassals unknown to either Kojou or Avrora would be facing off against Root. They had to be on Nagisa’s side.

Kojou didn’t know why—and possibly, even Nagisa herself didn’t know—but they might have been fond of her. And so, they were lending Kojou and Avrora their strength to save her. At the very least, that’s what Kojou believed. In that moment, it was enough.

“Ugh...!”

Root’s lips twisted at the unforeseen situation. Having just awakened, she had not yet achieved complete lordship over the Beast Vassals. This had invited rebellion from Enatos and others, putting her at a disadvantage. It had also set the stage for Kojou and Avrora to turn things around.

Pressed as she was, Root’s footing crumbled beneath her. The hexagonal crystal clock tower’s foundation was erased, as if the very space it occupied had been carved away.

A pair of intertwined dragons had destroyed it.

The two-headed creature, covered in scales of mercury, ate the clock tower, dragging Root down to earth.

“Al-Meissa Mercury!”

“—Tritos?!”

Avrora and Root shouted respectively. Root, continuing to fall, plucked out her last remaining wing and summoned a sixth Beast Vassal.

This was a monster enveloped by incandescent flames, with a shark’s teeth, a lion’s body, a bee-like tail, and bat wings—a mythological beast known as a manticore.

Even so, the Beast Vassals obeying Root did not exceed those that had allied

with Kojou and Avrora. The mercury-colored two-headed dragon wrapped around the manticore and pulled it away from Root.

“—It’s over, Root Avrora!”

With the dark-haired girl fallen to the ground, Kojou sprinted at her. Now that she’d released all of her Beast Vassals, Root was defenseless. When she turned around, Kojou restrained her movements by force.

“Lowly servant! Know thy place!”

The girl in Nagisa’s body thrust a hand toward Kojou’s flank. No doubt she intended to rip his rib away as she’d done when wiping out Zaharias. However, Kojou had intended for that to happen.

“Won’t work!”

Kojou firmly held down Root’s arm. Setting demonic energy aside, even Kojou could restrain her purely based on their difference in physical strength. With the two so close, Root couldn’t use her black wings, either. They were too powerful; attacking with them would hurt Nagisa’s body, too.

“Nngh?!”

Root became nervous when she realized she’d been immobilized. On top of that, standing behind her was a blond vampire girl—Avrora.

“Dodekatos?! Why you—!” Root screamed.

Avrora nestled against her from behind, touching her lips against Nagisa’s pale neck. Her sharp fangs pierced the soft skin.

Root’s eyes opened wide in shock.

“I see...this was your scheme all along! You cannibal!!”

Fresh blood trickled down her neck.

The strength drained from Nagisa’s body. Kojou gently let go of her outstretched arms.

The black-haired girl’s body went limp in the blond girl’s embrace. And then—  
Then, the two became one.

The bell continued to sound.

The tolling of the ruined clock tower.

The two girls were unmoving, almost like statues, as Kojou stood affixed to the spot, watching.

Cannibalism—

Or perhaps, overwriting.

This was what the masses called a vampire drinking another vampire's blood, taking the other's "bloodline" and "abilities" into oneself. However, bringing another being inside of oneself posed the risk of being taken over in turn, and having one's own essence overwritten.

Tooyama had spoken of such overwriting as one way to save Nagisa. Namely, if she were to take over Root Avrora's essence, Nagisa would become the Fourth Primogenitor while keeping her own personality intact.

Although, the chances of that actually happening in reality were basically zero. There was no way that Nagisa, a mere human, could hijack the Fourth Primogenitor.

Then what if the one doing the overwriting was not a human, but a vampire?

What if it was one constructed as the Fourth Primogenitor's watcher, and the vessel for her seal—?

This was the answer Kojou and Avrora had arrived at. The one and only possibility to save both Nagisa and Avrora.

Avrora's fangs remained in Nagisa's neck. She was inviting Root Avrora, the entity possessing Nagisa's body, into herself.

Avrora wasn't moving, almost like she was frozen. Inside her, the two souls were probably waging a fierce battle for lordship of their abilities that very moment.

"....."

Kojou gently trained the silver stake loaded into the crossbow on Avrora's

heart.

She'd said that the stake was a primogenitor-killing holy lance. If those words were true, it was his ace in the hole for destroying the Fourth Primogenitor.

If Avrora could overwrite Root's soul, great. On the other hand, if the time came that she was consumed by Root, Kojou would shoot her.

Even Kojou didn't know if he could really shoot Avrora, but if he left Root to her own devices, it would mean certain death for the large number of people caught up in the Blazing Banquet. Nagisa would probably be beyond saving. So Kojou would have to shoot. He had to do it even if he didn't want to. Then...

"Avrora...!"

The clock tower's bell struck one more time.

The next moment, the purportedly unconscious Nagisa burst into laughter.

It was not Nagisa's. It was clearly filled with scorn.

"Avrora...! It didn't work?!"

Kojou put his finger on the crossbow's trigger. He felt like he was praying as he awaited Avrora's answer. Nagisa continued to laugh until her beautiful voice trailed off.

"Victory is...yours..."

Haltingly, Nagisa murmured with satisfaction. Then, she closed her eyes as if falling asleep.

Avrora supported Nagisa's exhausted body and turned to Kojou. Nagisa's blood was dripping from the blond girl's lips.

Kojou glared at Avrora's blue, glimmering eyes and asked, "Root...right?"

Those eyes blinked in apparent surprise as Avrora shook her head. Her gesture seemed timid somehow, just like the Avrora Kojou knew well.

"I-I fulfill my promise to thee..."

Avrora murmured with a hint of pride as she set Nagisa's body on the ground.

Kojou recalled her promise. Nagisa's salvation—she said to Kojou that she



would fulfill that wish. And she had done that, perhaps knowing full well what it meant.

“You...fused with Root, didn’t you, Avrora?”

“.....”

Avrora’s silence was its own reply.

“I see.” Kojou lowered the crossbow. He took a step toward her.

She backed away without a word.

Snowflakes had begun dancing in the air around her. Snow never fell on the artificial island with never-ending summer. The cold air, enveloping the area around her, formed thick frost under her feet.

As Avrora tried to distance herself, Kojou drew close, taking her hand.

“Kojou...”

Avrora’s mouth opened, as if the girl wanted to say something. When she hesitated, Kojou spoke.

“You’re planning to sleep again, aren’t you?”

“...!”

Avrora bit her lip in surprise. From her reaction, Kojou knew he’d hit the mark.

She had indeed succeeded in overwriting Root, but that was probably only temporary. Avrora, no more than a vessel for a Beast Vassal, could not defeat the Cursed Soul created by the Devas. One day, Root would return; and next time, Avrora would probably fall completely under her domination.

Hence, she would seal herself away.

She would use the power of her Beast Vassal to encase herself in ice, just like in the ruin where she had slept for so long. She no doubt meant to continue to sleep alone, for hundreds, even thousands of years.

*I won’t let that happen, thought Kojou. I won’t let her be alone again.*

“I’m sticking with you. I’d be worried if I took my eyes off you.”

“...Kojou?”

“You’ll be in a bind without me next time you wake up, right? What’ll you do when you’ve gotta fasten a button?”

Kojou laughed. Aurora looked up at him, ready to cry.

Then her gaze fell to Kojou’s hand. After that, she suddenly chuckled softly. As she stared into Kojou’s eyes, her pupils held the quaint warmth peculiar to those who had resolved to face their fate.

“...I have granted thy wish... Now it is...your turn, Kojou...”

“Huh?”

Aurora’s indecipherable words suddenly terrified Kojou.

Against his will, his right hand rose—the hand grasping the metal crossbow. The silver stake loaded into it gently shifted toward Aurora’s heart.

“Aurora?!”

Seeing the glow in Aurora’s eyes made Kojou realize what was happening. Kojou was her—the Fourth Primogenitor’s—Blood Servant. She was controlling Kojou’s body.

And she was commanding it to shoot her.

“Stop...! Stop this, Aurora!”

Kojou desperately resisted, but his body would not listen. He could not defy the curse of the blood.

Yes. There was one other way to stop Root from reviving. Aurora would have to be wiped away while carrying Root’s soul within her. Vampire primogenitors were said to have been cursed with immortality. However, loaded in Kojou’s crossbow was a purging holy lance for killing those very primogenitors.

“The Cursed Soul, constructed as a weapon, shall vanish here, along with me... but...”

With Kojou unable to move, Aurora pierced his neck with her fangs. From there, Kojou felt something flowing into him. It was “power” in and of itself. To completely destroy the Cursed Soul, Aurora was splitting off the Fourth

Primogenitor's power and passing that on to Kojou. Then she and Root would disappear together to save Itogami Island, Kojou's world—

"I entrust thee with all of the Fourth Primogenitor's power. Take it."

"Stop, Aurora!"

Aurora subtly licked Kojou's blood as something like a tearful smile came over her.

Then, her eyes gently closed. In accordance with her will, Kojou's finger pulled the trigger.

"Kojou..."

What were the last words from her lips—?

The silver holy lance made a sound as light as a feather as it was fired, impaling her through the chest.

Kojou's vision was blotted out by a bright white light. White snowflakes danced amid the raging torrent of demonic energy.

And then, Kojou fell asleep.

A deep, deep slumber of oblivion.

The last thing Kojou saw was his own eyes, reflected by a piece of broken glass—

Crimson eyes, wet with tears.



OUTRO

## OUTRO

She sank. Her consciousness gradually descended into the vortex of light that surrounded her.

Inside the muted whiteness of her mind, the girl closed her blue eyes and smiled.

The Cursed Soul, sealed away within her in ages past, had been annihilated; accordingly, the power had been inherited by a teenage boy—the new Fourth Primogenitor. Her duty as a watcher was now at an end.

Her long, icy sleep had not been in vain.

Knowing that was enough. Satisfied, she smiled as she faded away.

The boy would probably forget about her.

The banquet that had already taken place had a cost that must be paid. The boy who had become the new Fourth Primogenitor was no exception to this. He and the others would forget she ever existed. The days he had spent with her. Even her name. However, they would not forget the existence of Nagisa Akatsuki. After all, Nagisa was no longer the Fourth Primogenitor. Their memories of her had been protected. Just like the boy had wanted.

She had fulfilled his wish. She took pride in this.

All that remained was for her to fade into the light.

Yes, that was all that should have remained.

*“—Are you really all right with that?”*

She felt like she heard someone speak.

The girl silently shook her head.

She would have been lying if she said she had no regrets.

She wanted to live on that island. She wanted to be closer to him. Those two things would be enough for her.

*“—Then, let’s do this...”*

Someone was clearly calling out to her. *“Just sleep inside me, then,”* the voice said.

Within her white field of vision, she saw a hand reaching out to her.

The hand of the black-haired girl.

The gifted priestess, combining past-seeing ability with the disposition of a spirit medium, able to accept even the power of the Fourth Primogenitor within her—

That hand grasped the girl’s wrist.

*“—Let’s go. Kojou’s waiting for us.”*

The invitation stirred the girl’s heart.

Without thinking, she grasped the slender hand offered to her.

Her sinking consciousness began to float up.

Toward the light. Toward a blue, summer sky once more.

And once more, two became one—



It had been two weeks since Island Old Southeast had sunk on the day after Kojou Akatsuki and Avrora had destroyed Root.

As the condemned area had been scheduled to be destroyed to begin with, it was child’s play for the Gigafloat Management Corporation to manipulate its information. They simply announced that the schedule for dismantling had been moved up. In addition, there was the just cause of preventing the outbreak from spreading. And so, the populace accepted the annihilation of Old Southeast with surprising ease.

In spite of sustaining enough damage to sink an entire Gigafloat, the fatalities were miraculously low because most humans left on the island had been transformed into pseudo-vampires. The hardiness and vast life force of a

vampire's body allowed a great tragedy to be averted. Ironically, they had been saved by the vampirism epidemic caused by the Blazing Banquet.

The outbreak had subsided just as rapidly as it had occurred, and the vast majority of patients returned to their peaceful daily lives. Many had lost precious memories, but they themselves were little aware of that, and the gaps in their minds would someday fill in again.

As long as they had someone to fill them with—

“Heya. You finally came, too, huh, Vel...”

That day, Motoki Yaze was visiting a medical facility specializing in demons under the Gigafloat Management Corporation's control. It was more of a lab than a hospital; perhaps it was more accurate to call it an experimental facility. In exchange for risky human experimentation, they had access to super-advanced medical technologies—just the sort of audacious facility that couldn't exist outside a Demon Sanctuary.

When Yaze heard that a patient accepted for treatment had regained consciousness after two weeks, he'd gone running, flower bouquet in hand.

“Geez, recovering a vampire that's turned to mist is quite a thing. It's a hell of a lot harder than just tweaking the airflow.”

The vampire, dressed in pajamas, was sitting up on the bed. Maybe it was because her brown hair had been cut short, but her facial features, reflective of her fine upbringing, seemed much younger than before.

Or maybe the burden she'd been carrying had been lifted from her shoulders.

On the night of the banquet, it had been Yaze who'd recovered Veldiana, heavily wounded and unable to even maintain physical form. She'd spent nearly ten days in that facility straddling the line between life and death.

In the end, it wasn't Yaze or the Demon Sanctuary's medical technology that had really saved her. Her salvation had come from a somewhat unexpected source.

“Well, I suppose the Lion King Agency's chick with the metal mask felt a little guilty for using you like that. Looks like bringing you back was a pretty hard

thing. Enough that there was a rumor she borrowed the power of some primogenitor or other.”

Yaze ran his hand along his combed-back hair and laughed.

All that said, from the Lion King Agency’s perspective, the results of recent events weren’t bad at all. It might not have been exactly how they preferred, but they’d accomplished their objective. The Fourth Primogenitor had been born in Japan, with that power vested not in the uncontrollable Cursed Soul, but in an ordinary high schooler.

From that standpoint, saving one little vampire girl was an inexpensive celebratory gift.

As Yaze laughed at the irony, Veldiana looked up at him and asked, “Who are you...?”

A glint of unease and wariness floated into her eyes, the sort one had when meeting a stranger for the first time.

She didn’t remember Yaze.

“Ahh, that’s right. The effect of Root’s ability to rob people of their memories, huh... Well, it’s not surprising you had your memories ripped out by the roots... I avoided contact with Av as much as I could, and even I lost a few.”

“Memories?”

Veldiana looked down at both hands as she asked. In her present state, she couldn’t have much memory about anything. Having lived only for the sake of avenging her family, most of her memories were related to the Fourth Primogenitor. Root had used that as a foothold for robbing her of them.

But by no means was that all a bad thing.

Even if she’d lost her memories, she’d been freed of the Fourth Primogenitor’s curse. Those that had been lost would never return, but she could lay her hands on new ones. Besides, she had somewhere to go back to. Even if she herself was not aware of it, Veldiana had people waiting for her to come home.

Maybe it was a lot shabbier than what she once had, but this wasn’t



something obtained with the authority of nobility, or the power of the Fourth Primogenitor. It was something Veldiana had earned all by herself.

“Who...am I...?”

Veldiana posed the question to Yaze in a frail voice. He grinned and laughed in reply.

Yaze hadn't come all that way just to bring a big flower bouquet for the vase in her hospital room.

“Your name is Veldiana Caruana—the number one, clumsy waitress for the Hell Demon House café.”

For a second, the girl's brows rose in bewilderment at Yaze's description. She made only the smallest of pouts as she laughed.

The window displayed Itogami Island's blue sky.

Time, once stopped, slowly began flowing again.



Back in the present—

Kojou Akatsuki opened his eyes on top of a hospital-room bed of his own.

Somehow, the place seemed familiar to him. It must have been in MAR's medical wing. Thanks to Nagisa's repeated hospitalizations, he was accustomed to the atmosphere of the building.

However, Kojou wasn't in an isolation room like Nagisa had been. He was in a large room for general patients.

The air felt a little musty. Maybe this place didn't get much use.

Kojou hadn't been hospitalized. It felt like he'd simply been stuffed in a suitably empty room for him to rest in until he woke up. Now that he thought back, someone had told him that he and Asagi had lost consciousness and collapsed just after the conclusion of the Third Primogenitor's raid.

There were four beds in the room, but Kojou's was the only one in use. Yet, there was another person there with him—a woman wearing a wrinkled white gown.

“Mm-hmm... You’re awake, Kojou?”

The woman hummed as she looked over her shoulder with a sleepy face, bringing a popsicle to her lips. It was Kojou’s mother, Mimori Akatsuki.

*Even a doctor like you shouldn’t eat ice cream in a hospital room, sheesh,* thought Kojou in annoyance.

“This is?”

But Mimori took no heed of her son’s dissatisfaction, sitting squarely on an empty bed.

“There was a thunder strike just as you and the others arrived here at MAR. Do you remember?”

“...Thunder strike?”

“Looks like the shock bowled you over. You don’t have serious injuries, so you can go home once things settle.”

“.....”

Kojou glared at the grinning Mimori before turning his eyes toward the outside window.

The Beast Vassal employed by the Third Primogenitor had been in the form of a giant thundercloud. If MAR insisted that the destruction of its medical wing was also the work of a thunder strike, no one was likely to dispute it. If it altered the records in the security pods of its own manufacture, no evidence would remain whatsoever. The matter would be completely brushed under the table as if it had never happened at all.

“So what about the coffin that was underground? Why is that here?”

“Ah... You saw that, did you?”

*Well that’s unfortunate,* the rise of Mimori’s eyebrow seemed to say. It was an oddly cute expression one didn’t expect from someone over the age of thirty.

“Actually, Kojou, that’s the body of an alien. The North American Union recovered it from a crashed UFO and asked us to study it in secret—”

“You big liar!”

Kojou, who’d earnestly listened to her story, shouted and tossed a pillow back at her to repay her for the low-rent gag. “Ahh, what a lovely reaction...,” Mimori said in a show of admiration.

“Is that what you normally say in this kind of situation?! A person would believe anything if it wasn’t an off-the-wall lie, wouldn’t they?!”

“That princess is the legacy of the Devas, excavated from a ruin in the Mediterranean. The Gigafloat Management Corporation asked us to manage her here for them. There’s a proper contract and everything.”

“Ugh...”

Mimori’s explanation, not giving him a single avenue for rebuttal, cowed Kojou into silence. Now that he thought about it, there was no evidence that the coffin of ice had ever been destroyed or that the sleeping princess within had been released. Since those who’d met her had lost their memories, the coffin remained in the same place where it had originally been brought.

“How much...do you know?”

Kojou glared at his mother as he asked. Whether she knew what Kojou was and only pretended not to know, or whether she had lost her memory—Kojou had no idea what she was thinking.

“Mm, about what?”

Mimori mused such words as she fished another treat out of a cooler. Seeing how happy she was, at some point Kojou decided that it was fine.

If there was one thing he understood about Mimori and Gajou, it was that their actions, then and now, were always for Nagisa’s sake. At the moment, that was enough. Besides, Kojou had hidden things from both his parents, too. It would be a little unfair for only Kojou to complain.

“Aaaah... Wrapping things up will be a real pain today. I probably won’t be able to return home for a while again, but do take care of Nagisa, ’kay?”

“Yeah. Not that I really get all that, but don’t overdo it, either. You aren’t getting any younger.”

As his mother got to her feet, Kojou threw a minor dig at her. Mimori gave a “Hmph,” pouting her lips like she was hurt, and then held something out to Kojou: a cold, sparkling cube of translucent ice.

“...Want some ice?”

Mimori’s eyes narrowed teasingly. Kojou made a strained, exasperated smile as he accepted it.

“—Kojou!”

Barely a moment had passed between his mother leaving the room and Nagisa entering in her place.

Rather than wearing her school uniform, Nagisa was in her gym outfit. Now that Kojou thought about it, he’d heard Nagisa had been in PE when she’d collapsed at school. A gym uniform in a hospital seemed somewhat amusingly out of place.

“Nagisa...are you feeling all right?”

“Huh?! What’s with all that worry on your face? It’s been a while since I collapsed, so I was a bit surprised, but it’s the same as usual, plain old anemia. They gave me an IV, they’ll do some other tests later, they said if nothing weird shows up I can go home... Er, Kojou, there’s blood on your uniform! What happened?! Was it the lightning from before?!”

Nagisa spoke in her boisterous, rapid-fire manner, same as usual.

Kojou stood up without a word and hugged his little sister. Her small figure was still a little delicate since she was still so young, but the warmth of her body put him at ease.

Nagisa was safe. The girl *she* and Kojou had risked their lives to protect was right there with him.

“Wh...what’s come over you, Kojou?! Was it the lightning?! Was it that scary?!”

Nagisa was a little nervous at Kojou’s sudden action, but she didn’t look like she really minded. It was no doubt simple embarrassment.

In spite of that, Nagisa relented midway, making an awkward grin as she said,

“There, there,” and pat Kojou’s back.

“Sheesh, there’s just no helping you, Kojou. Even with everyone watching.”

“...Everyone?”

Confused by Nagisa’s words, Kojou abruptly turned toward the room’s entrance. Standing there were two girls in school uniforms. One was a transferred middle schooler with a black guitar bag. And the other was a girl from his own class, with an extravagant hairstyle that really stood out.

Asagi gazed half-lidded at Kojou cuddling with Nagisa and said, “There’s his sister complex...”

Yukina, maintaining a neutral expression while standing beside her, agreed in an oddly flat tone.

“You really are an incorrigible siscon, senpai.”

“Wha...? I am not!! This ain’t that, it’s a touching reunion!! A lot happened on the way here, that’s all!”

Kojou hastily released his little sister. In spite of the blushy redness of her cheeks, Nagisa, now freed of his embrace, didn’t look particularly bothered as she smiled.

Asagi chimed in, “Well, Nagisa needs to go back to the consultation room. Mimori said she’d take Nagisa home later, so...”

“That so... Guess we’ll head home first then.”

“Yeah. Yukina, thanks for staying with me. Asagi, thanks for coming to visit. Take care of Kojou for me!”

Nagisa grasped Yukina’s and Asagi’s hands in turn before heading out of the hospital room with a spring in her step. She looked much like a cute little animal running around the room. Yukina, watching her from behind as she departed, giggled out loud with a gentle expression.

“Nagisa’s cute, isn’t she?”

“She really is. It’s easy to understand why Kojou likes her so much.”

“I told you already, it’s not like that!”

Asagi's earnest murmur made Kojou bare his teeth in annoyance. All Yukina said was "I wonder," as she stared at Kojou, completely bereft of trust.

"But I really am happy that Nagisa is all right."

"Well yeah... Although it was just us staring death in the face this time..."

Kojou looked at the still-fresh traces of the destroyed medical wing and limply exhaled.

Then, he began preparing to head home.

He'd confirmed that Nagisa was safe, and the mystery of the icy coffin had been solved. Kojou's heartfelt desire was to get away from that place without another moment to spare.

They were heading along the path leading to the hospital gate when Yukina suddenly asked, "So you recovered your memories, senpai—?"

Kojou was a little surprised as he looked at Yukina, walking to his right.

"...That Prison Barrier business was real after all."

"Yes."

Yukina nodded in reply to Kojou.

The time was past eight PM. It had been barely over three hours since Kojou and Asagi had collapsed at MAR. However, Kojou and the others had spent far more time than that in the Prison Barrier, hence why he had suspected that it might have all been a dream.

But this was because the Prison Barrier itself was a space that existed inside of Natsuki Minamiya's dream. By comparison, a different flow of time inside the Prison Barrier wasn't strange at all.

Yet, it also meant that everything Kojou and Asagi had experienced inside that dream was real. The people he met there—and their deaths—were past events on the island that had really taken place—

"I feel like I have more to remember than I did until now, but to be honest, I don't really want to remember it. I feel like I lost something important back there."

Kojou firmly clenched his fist as he murmured to no one in particular.

The only things remaining in his head were fragments. He didn't understand if it was true or not anymore. It didn't feel real.

But still, those memory fragments had strongly stirred Kojou's emotions.

One day, perhaps, he would be able process those feelings and make those emotions his own, but not that day. They were like shards of glass—just touching them made his heart bleed.

Asagi agreed with Kojou's view, though her annoyance was evident in her tone.

"Mentally, seeing yourself in the past gets to you a little. I feel like I just listened to an aunt talking on and on about her childhood."

The memories she'd experienced weren't necessarily the same as Kojou's. But she'd probably experienced her own wounds and anguish from it. The time they had experienced made Kojou and Asagi the people they were in the present.

"...Himeragi, you're fine, though?" Kojou asked, suspicious of Yukina acting like none of what happened concerned her.

Yukina averted her eyes with a somewhat conflicted look.

"No, because I was not affected by the grimoire. Due to certain circumstances, the expected sharing of memories failed."

"Huh? It did?"

"What the...? That's so not fair!"

Asagi and Kojou resentfully scowled at Yukina. Somehow, the fact only they had to relive their past embarrassments didn't sit well with them.

"But I do regret not knowing anything about senpai's past."

Yukina spoke nonchalantly, but she did so in a quiet murmur. "Hrmm," Asagi said, hearing every word, and a guarded, suspicious look came over her. Then, Yukina became somewhat nervous, realizing her own verbal slip.

"I-in the sense that it might hinder my mission as his watcher."

"Figured it was something like that," said Kojou with a tired, heavy sigh. "It's

fine, right? You remember every detail about me since you came to this island and all.”

Kojou had faced death numerous times in the nearly three months since she’d come to Itogami Island, but he’d somehow scraped by. Yukina had been at Kojou’s side each step of the way. It wasn’t something either could forget even if they wanted to. That was all he meant by it, but...

“That’s true. I suppose you’re right.”

For some reason, Yukina was in an especially good mood as she gave a slight nod.

In contrast, Asagi didn’t find it amusing whatsoever, puffing up one of her cheeks.

“Come to think of it, Kojou, there’s one thing I wanted to ask you.”

“What’s that?”

“In the end, what did you think of Avrora?”

Kojou coughed audibly, as if Asagi’s question were a blade with the tip at his own throat.

Even if Asagi didn’t know all the fine details, she’d met Avrora several times in the past. Having relived the past, it was those encounters she was no doubt remembering. Perhaps she thought now was the time to ask the question she hadn’t posed earlier.

“Wh...what do you mean...?”

“Did you...like her?”

The way she was peering straight at him made Kojou feel backed into a corner. Somehow trying to look natural as he averted his gaze, his eyes met Yukina’s as she watched him like a hawk.

Kojou felt sweat uncomfortably dripping down his back. He didn’t think either was likely to accept his reply no matter what he said.

With his back against the wall, a single-sheet leaflet was suddenly offered to him.



At the intersection, leaflets were being handed out by a registered male demon wearing a curious-looking tuxedo with a black coat over it. The leaflet was advertising the second anniversary of a café's opening, complete with coupons for a very particular menu. He recognized the name of the place—not that it mattered right then.

“Hey, come to think of it, I’m starving. Let’s go eat something. See, there’s specials here and everything!”

Clinging to the passing ship, Kojou raised the leaflet and spoke with forced cheer. With weary looks, Asagi and Yukina stared at him and sighed.

“Well, I thought it’d end up something like this.”

“As did I—”

When the two girls’ gazes met, they ended up bursting into laughter together like coconspirators.

Enveloped by feelings he could not put into words, the boy inheriting the title of Fourth Primogenitor returned to his daily life.

The silent light of the pale, gleaming moon shone on him and his companions.



## Afterword

As I write this manuscript, it is currently the end of May. Since I'm working right on the heels of the last volume (the seventh), at some point, Japan leaped from the middle of winter through spring and all the way to summer's eve, right before the beginning of the rainy season. (Or, maybe I could explain it as me just pretending not to really notice.) Goodness, cherry blossom viewing season and Golden Week ended without my even noticing. Three months ago, I was like, my winter coat, scarf, and space heater sure won't be much use in all this crappy heat—and that's where my memory pretty much stops.

What I'm trying to say in a roundabout way is that human memory is a vague thing. You might not be able to remember a single thing happening over the course of months, but you keep remembering that one momentary screwup you made years ago that you always regretted. That's the sort of thing Kojou and Asagi experienced, I think. Well, I get the feeling he'd probably snap at me to the effect of, *Don't compare the two, dammit*.

And so, *Strike the Blood*, Vol. 8 has arrived.

This volume constitutes a break with the past. This is a story with its ultimate destination determined at the start; at any rate, I took care that it would not simply be one tragedy after another. I'd be happy if you thought of it as a tale that, once you've read it, has a silver lining.

Anyway, this time, the length constituted most of my agony. I listed scene after scene that I wanted to write, but, as these would be about five books' worth of material, I tearfully cut out numerous parts. In particular, I wanted to give Aurora and her kind more happiness.

Such are my regrets, but since it's been some time since I thought about even my own characters this way, I had a lot of fun writing what I did. If I make up for what I didn't get to write in some other way in the future, that'll be fine.

From the next volume onward, I expect to return things to a normal time

flow, making it feel like a restart. I'll be happy just from the joy of continuing this.

Now then, I'm very sorry for all the trouble I caused for everyone because I was seriously behind schedule. Allow me to borrow this space to apologize.

Manyako, the illustrator—truly, thank you again.

To TATE-sensei, congratulations on safely getting Volume 2 of the comic version of *Strike the Blood* to bookshelves.

In addition, from the bottom of my heart, I thank all of you who have read this book.

I hope to see you again next volume.

*Gakuto Mikumo*

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